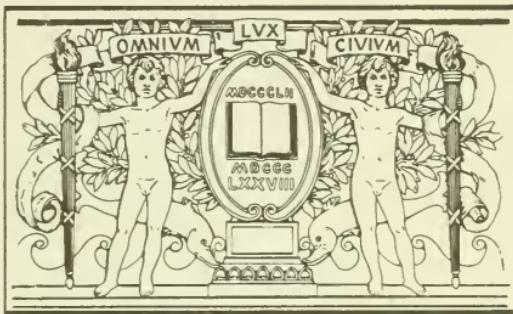


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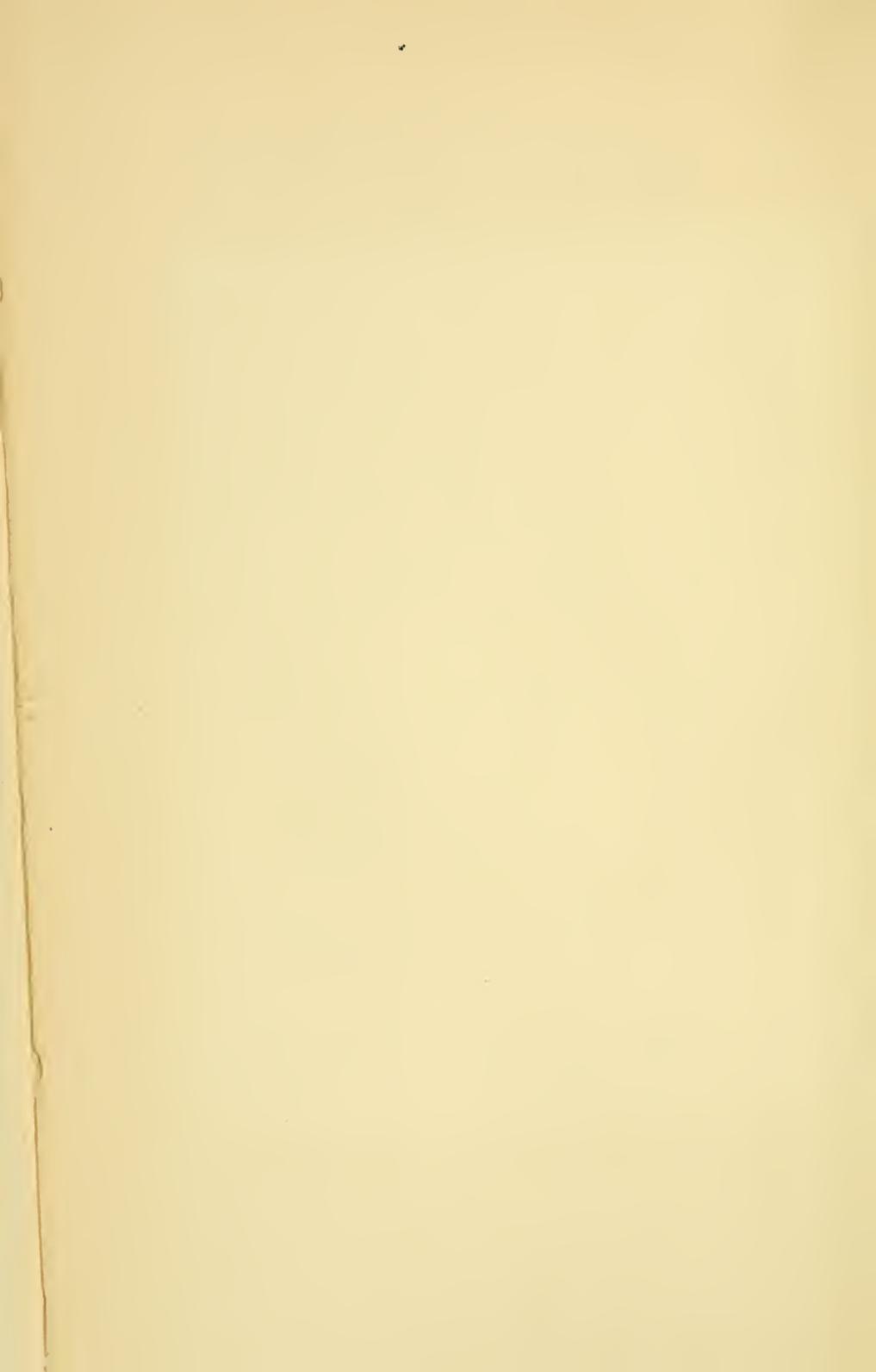




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THE PRICE OF SILENCE



(page 22)

NOÉMIE

The Price of Silence

BY

M. E. M. DAVIS

With Illustrations by Griswold Tyng



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
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TO

THOMAS E. DAVIS

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THE PRICE OF SILENCE

I

PROLOGUE: A DOMICILIARY VISIT

THE narrow streets of the French Quarter resembled canals ; the rain, descending from a sky which half an hour earlier had been as innocently blue as a baby's eyes, rolled in smoky waves down pointed roofs and spouted from projecting gutters ; the slender arcs on either side interlaced in mid-air to plunge, a frothing column, into the rising flood below. Canal Street was for the moment a wide lagoon ; the thoroughfares beyond sent up a reek of mud and ooze to meet the deluge. In the Garden District, magnolia and rose-bush cast upon miniature seas a vain sacrifice of snow-white and rose-red. The innumerable Confederate flags, which everywhere lent a bright touch of color to a background of brick and stucco, drooped, washed-out and lifeless, from staff, window-sill, and balcony. The

few vehicles abroad stood impotent, or moved doubtfully, their teams belly-deep in water. There were no women visible, and but few men, and there was a strange unearthly hush about, unaccounted for by the rain,—for when has one of their birthright waterspouts kept New Orleans folk, men or women, indoors, or quenched the lightsomeness of soul which is theirs, also by inheritance? But now? Yesterday, the flash of gray uniforms uptown and down,—zouave, *chasseur à pied*, home-guard, regular,—the dancing jingle of cavalry, the steady tramp of infantry, clatter of artillery; the hurrying in and the speeding forth of couriers; the sharp challenge of sentry and guard; the glitter of sword-hilt and bayonet; the blare of trumpets; the gay red-and-white of “Confederate” flowers on bonnet or parasol of *grande dame* and *bourgeoise*; song, badinage, laughter! Cheers for the forts down yonder guarding the gateway of the Mississippi.

To-day, empty streets, closed doors, silence, terror, despair.

In truth a wet day and a dreary, that 25th of April, eighteen hundred and sixty-two. “Oh,

but of a wetness to drown the devil!" cries Madame de Laussan, telling the ancient tale once and again, "and of a melancholy, *mon Dieu!*" Madame's aristocratic old hands tremble upon the arms of her high-backed chair; her bright old eyes cloud and droop.

Across the rain-squall, that long-gone day, in-borne townward from the levee in fitful whiffs, came odd, intermingled odors,—pungent, oily, candied, resinous: the smell of burning sugar, rice, molasses, cotton, tarred timber,—an echo, as it were, of that vast holocaust which for twenty-four hours had lighted the river front. "They may eat us if they will, those Yankees,—may our bones choke them!—but not a grain of sugar, neither rice; not a rind of bacon shall the monsters find. Not a flake of cotton, not a gunboat; not even so much as a pirogue for the spying out of our bayous. Burn! Burn! Burn!" And even while the bell in old Christ Church belfry spelled out into the air the preconcerted warning that the forts at the river mouth had fallen and Farragut was well on his way toward the city with his fleet, frenzied hands had heaped upon the levee the priceless contents of

sugar-warehouse and cotton-shed, storehouse and *magasin*, and set torch to barrel, hogshead, and bale. By the light of these leaping flames, gun-boats, cutters, steamboats, flatboats, canoes were fired. Even now, as the pelting rain trampled a last spurt of smoke from the ashes, the Confederate States gunboat, the Mississippi, swept majestically down the stream, a towering wraith of flame, to meet the Federal fleet dawning into view around Slaughterhouse Bend, stately, sinister, terrible.

The great mob on the levee fell silent. Small wonder, by the way, that the streets of the city were deserted! Here were the men,—for the most part old men and boys; vigorous manhood had long ago followed the call of trumpet and drum to the front. They stared—motionless, like men turned to stone—at the approaching ships. Suddenly an unearthly, shuddering groan rent the air. It came from the Confederate cutter Washington, lying off the wharf. She turned heavily on her side, quivered as if racked by some internal convulsion, reared, dripping, groaned a second time, and plunged headlong into the yellow flood. The downward-

sucking waters closed swirling over her masts. To many a graybeard there this portent of evil brought the chill of impending ruin ; it broke for all the spell of numb silence. They surged, swaying and jostling, with upturned arms and clenched fists, to the edge of the levee, and burst into a prolonged howl of rage,—hoarse, primitive, like the bellow of some titanic animal. The grim gunners on Farragut's flagship, the Hartford, looked over, as she swung to her moorings, into a sea of livid faces, glaring eyeballs which spat flames, open mouths which vomited curses, trembling chins which wagged impotent imprecations.

The women, huddled behind closed doors in the French Quarter, in the Garden District, in all the length and breadth of the town, heard the echo of that first anguished, helpless roar ; then a fierce, exultant cry which was shouted from quarter to quarter, from street to street, from door to door, until the crescent vibrated from horn to horn with its triumph: “ Bless Gawd ! Moses has fetched his people th'oo. Freedom ! Freedom ! De Yankees is come ! ” And the listeners, pale and tearless, behind closed doors,

fell on their knees, and clasped their little daughters to their breasts, and prayed.

The rain ceased; the sun shone out with mocking brilliancy.

A fortnight later the old Town by the River, the scene of so many and such romantic episodes in times past, was once more gay with flags. Again there were flash of uniform and glitter of sword-hilt on boulevard and banquette. The terse challenge of sentry and guard was setting loose the echoes in ancient courtyards and mysterious corridors; couriers dashed back and forth; the steady tread of marching feet resounded. But the flags which blossomed upon flagstaff and balcony, and here and there stretched — for reasons of state! — sheer across the streets, were the stars and stripes; the red-and-white of the Southern Confederacy was forbidden even to the bonnet and the parasol of great lady and market-woman. The uniforms where gray had been were blue; and in lieu of the happy-go-lucky strains of “Dixie Land,” the more conventional notes of “The Star Spangled Banner” smote upon ears which grew red with indignation at the sound.

Butler's Reign of Terror had begun; already his infamous sobriquet was in whispered circulation. The "Yankees" lounged and clanked, after the manner of soldiers, about the barracks vacated by their "rebel" foes. The Provost Marshal had already begun those domiciliary visits whose memory lingers unpleasantly still in many a household in New Orleans. Already the "Yankee" flag was so hung here and there that the women might not, by stepping into the street, avoid passing beneath its hated folds. Already houses were being confiscated, and their owners, men and women alike, sent into exile, or, if recalcitrant, into prison. Already the freed slaves, insolently lording it, when possible, over their former masters and mistresses, were adding to the confusion and disorder which seethed beneath the hard surface of martial law.

But of these last many remained loyal to their "white folks," maintaining their loyalty in the snarling teeth of their own race and amid the jeers of their liberators. One such, a mulatto woman about twenty-five years of age, passed swiftly up Canal Street from the Custom House one morning early in the May following the arrival of the

Federal fleet, and turned into Rue Royale. She threw furtive looks over her shoulder as she walked, and paid no heed to the ribald compliments and unseemly jests of the soldiers idling along the banquette. She paused at length before an immense batten door below Toulouse Street, stood for a moment breathless in its embrasure, then pulled the bell once and again, allowing a short interval to elapse between the two rings. The faint tinkling within had not fully ceased when, darting a hasty look up and down the street, she unlocked the gate with a key drawn from her bosom, opened it, and stepped in, closing the green valve behind her.

The sharp sound of the gate-bell jarred the tense silence which pervaded the library of the de Laussan mansion. Madame de Laussan, standing by the massive library table supporting herself with a hand grasping its edge, listened anxiously for the prearranged second ring, and for the opening and shutting of the street door; then turned, with a look of relief on her pale face, to her son. Pierre de Laussan, a lad of sixteen, stood facing his mother, his young brow as pale, his lips as firmly set, as her own.

They were strikingly alike, Madame de Laussan and her son, her only child. She looked, in the bloom of her beauty, scarce older than the lad ; she was, indeed, a little more than double his age. There were the same dark eyes beneath straight black eyebrows, the same proud mouth and rounded though determined chin, the same white, even teeth and flashing smile, the same black uncurling hair — only Pierre's thick locks were cut close to his shapely head. The braids which crowned the mother's brow were marvelously thick and heavy ; the locks fell, when unbound, to her feet. (At this writing, though Madame is hard upon eighty, her long and abundant tresses, silver-white, are the wonder and admiration of the *Vieux Carré*.)

Madame de Laussan resumed her admonition. She spoke with an effort ; the hand grasping the edge of the table shook. "My son," she continued, "I can no longer withhold my consent. I give you, as I have already given your father, to the Southern Confederacy. You will, young as you are, show yourself the true son of that brave father ; you will prove yourself worthy of the high name you bear and of the gallant men who

have borne it before you ; you will — Oh, Pierre, my boy, my boy ! ” The mother welling up from the depths of an agonized heart effaced the patriot. “ How can I send you away from me ! How — ”

“ Mother ! ” What the lad would have said remained unspoken. The mulattress burst into the room, hurling herself forward, and dropped, panting, at the feet of Madame de Laussan.

“ Little mistress ! ” she gasped in a sharp whisper, “ they — are — coming — the Provost Guard — to search the house — for Master — Pierre ! ”

She spoke, like the others, in French, though with a curiously soft, slurring accent.

“ But — Sirène — ” stammered her mistress, throwing a terrified glance toward the door.

“ How do you know ? ” demanded Pierre sternly, stooping to seize the woman’s wrist with an accusing hand.

“ Hush, Pierre, ” interrupted his mother, assisting the freedwoman gently to her feet. “ I would stake my life on Sirène’s fidelity.”

Sirène lifted grateful eyes to the speaker.

“ Listen, ’tite maîtresse, ” she implored ; “ there is not one moment to lose. They are coming — ”

the guard — on the instant. It is Hercule who has sent me to tell you; Hercule, who is himself a guide to that guard — the traitor. They will search the house, Hercule says; they will take Master Pierre away to — to prison — ”

“ *Pierre!* ” Madame de Laussan sprang forward to strain her son convulsively to her bosom; then she thrust him frantically from her. “ Go, go, my son. No, oh, no, stay! Escape is impossible. Better prison than to be shot in the attempt to fly these bloodthirsty monsters. Remain here at my side. I command you! ”

“ Mother, dear mother! ” He soothed her with a caressing hand. “ I shall get away, and safely, never fear. And when you next hear from me, ” he added with boyish exultation, “ I shall be in the ranks, a Confederate soldier, like my father. ” He threw himself a last time into her arms, touched Sirène’s shoulder with an affectionate palm, and turned toward the door. But he darted back to snatch from its place above the mantel a sword whose jeweled hilt sparkled in the sunlight falling upon it from the open window.

“I am going to hide this,” he declared. “I cannot take it away with me, but whatever else they may lay their hands upon, they shall not defile with so much as a touch this sword.”

His mother’s terrified whisper of warning sent him flying from the room. The heavy portière as he lifted it revealed a stately hall beyond, with thickly carpeted stairway upon which his hurried feet left no trace, and which gave back no echo.

Madame de Laussan bounded back to her place, and laid her hand for support once more on the table. She motioned the mulattress to approach. “You must not be seen here — with me, Sirène,” she whispered. “You will be suspected of — disloyalty to your — deliverers. Save yourself, dear Sirène, and may the Holy Virgin smile upon you for what you have done this day for my boy. Tried to do.” She corrected herself with pale lips. Sirène stooped to lift the hem of her mistress’s gown to her lips, and stepped without a word a little to the rear, where she stood with arms folded across her breast, her fine face impassive below the brightly colored *tignon*, her dark eyes filled with smouldering flames.

To the loud, imperative hammering on the batten gate below had succeeded a crash, as of a breaking lock, and a rush of heavy feet along the flagged porte cochère. Now a steady tramp echoed on the winding stair without. A moment later, Lieutenant Sidney Cortland, U. S. A., entered the library in a sort of angry haste. He was followed immediately by a squad of United States soldiers. Hercule, the guide, a huge muscular griffe,—ten days earlier the body-servant of Pierre de Laussan,—stepped in after them. He threw an indifferent glance around, and stood impassive as Sirène herself.

At sight of the beautiful, pale women confronting him, Cortland, a fair, florid young man with pale-blue, unsteady eyes and a handsome, weak mouth, paused involuntarily and removed his hat. His men stared boldly and insolently at mistress and maid.

“Madame de Laussan?” queried the officer, consulting the slip of paper which he drew from his belt.

Madame de Laussan inclined her head haughtily.

“—the wife of Nemours de Laussan—”

“The wife of Colonel Nemours de Laussan of the Confederate States Army, in command of the —th Louisiana regiment of infantry.” She spoke in a clear, ringing voice, and in English of unusual purity.

Cortland reddened, but dropped his eyes to the paper and continued: “You have a son —”

“Pierre Nemours de Laussan, yes, monsieur. On his way at this moment to enter the Confederate States Army,” interrupted Madame de Laussan. Her dark, flashing eyes were full upon her inquisitor; but between him and her there seemed to float a slim figure, with sword uplifted, bared head up-thrown, the young face flushed with enthusiasm. Her ears were strained toward the hall, the stairway, the upper chambers. She did not even see, as Sirène, alert behind her bronze mask, saw, the crafty guide — late the valet of Pierre de Laussan — glide stealthily along the wall and disappear behind the heavy folds of the portière.

“That’s a lie,” growled the sergeant of the guard half under his breath. “The young spy is somewhere about this house. Our own spies have been at his heels for a week. He’s in this

house!" His fox-like eyes subtly threatened his superior officer as he spoke. Cortland winced.

"I regret to say, madam," he stammered, "that we shall have to search the house—"

"Hell!" muttered the sergeant, grinning openly. "Are we the Provost Guard, or are we French dancing-masters?"

"Pierre de Laussan is accused of furnishing treasonable information to the enemy. Also—"

"You may spare yourself—and me—the details of the work of your spies," said Madame de Laussan disdainfully; "they do not interest me. As for the search, I am at once a woman and defenseless, while you, a Yankee officer, have the assistance of these—gentlemen."

She swept to the floor in an ironical curtsy, her contemptuous glance embracing Cortland and his men.

Stung to the quick, Cortland wheeled about and gave the necessary orders to his soldiers in a curt voice whose echoes rang strangely through the silent house. He himself led the way, lifting the portière as Pierre had done half an hour earlier.

Neither mistress nor maid stirred from her

place when the squad had filed out, leaving two of their number on guard. These seated themselves familiarly in the great armchairs on either side of the fireplace, and enlivened the tedium of their waiting with the coarse laughter and the coarser jests of the guardroom. Madame de Laussan stood rigid, outwardly calm, absolutely heedless of allusions which grew more and more unfit for the ears, happily deaf to all outer sound, as the great, anguished eyes were blind to all outer vision. Later, there surged into her memory, as if from some half-forgotten dream, the face of the griffe, Hercule. Was there meaning in the rapid glance he threw her as he slipped from behind the portière and mounted the stair in the wake of the intruders?

A burst of strident laughter presently awoke the little Mathilde, niece and adoptive daughter of Madame de Laussan. The two-year-old child, who had slept peacefully thus far through the unwonted confusion, screamed loudly. Sirène flew to her nursling, lifted her from the sofa where she was lying, soothed her into quiet with tender, inarticulate murmurings, and then resumed her post beside her mistress.

The house, after the Provost Guard had finally departed laden with plunder, presented a scene of wild confusion: the contents of armoires and cabinets were flung about; drawers and closets, rifled of their treasures, remained open; fragments of crystal and china strewed the floor of the dining-room; buffets were stripped of ancestral silver. Madame de Laussan surveyed the wreck with shining eyes; her hands were clasped in an ecstasy of thankfulness.

“It is nothing, *Sirène*,” she cried. “My *Pierre*, thanks to *Hercule*, is safe, somewhere, somehow. You are unharmed. What matters the rest!”

Nevertheless a troubled frown furrowed her white brow when, order somewhat restored, looking over the scattered débris from her private desk, she noted the absence of a certain small casket. It had been appropriated, doubtless, for its own odd beauty, since it contained nothing of great intrinsic value,—two or three family rings only, an ornament or two, and a single letter. Madame de Laussan made, through Union friends, futile efforts to recover the box; she employed *Hercule*, the crafty, to find if possible its present possessor, and to bargain for its

return. But it had disappeared, with other articles of more value. The de Laussan diamonds, famed for their splendor and magnificence, safe in their hiding-place, had fortunately escaped the greedy eyes of the guard.

Pierre's first letter, smuggled in, came a month later. It related the story of the writer's escape — by the aid of Hercule — over the roofs into the house of a non-suspect; afterward through the lines into the Confederacy; it told in buoyant strain of his enlistment in his father's command, and of the stirring scenes which were enacting about him. The brief postscript ran: "The Lafayette sword is in a safe hiding-place there at home. We will hang it upon the wall again, you and I, mother, when the war is over, and Johnny comes marching home."

There came no second letter from the young volunteer; he fell, shot through the head, in a nameless skirmish less than a month after Madame de Laussan pressed to her lips the faded wayside flower enclosed in the first letter. Colonel de Laussan died in hospital of wounds received in battle in the spring of 1863. Father



MADAME DE LAUSSAN

and son, their sacred dust brought back after the war to their native state, sleep side by side in the stately tomb of the *famille de Laussan*, in the old St. Louis Cemetery at New Orleans.

II

MATIN

A HUGE spider, bloated, venomous, swung slowly earthward,—from nowhere, apparently, for only the frail tip of a twig on the crêpe myrtle interposed between him and upper aerial space. He paid out jerkily the silver rope by which he descended. His fury body brushed, in passing, the back of Noémie's hand ; his up-curved legs instantly shot out ; they effected a foothold a second later on her knee, whence he began to mount, high-stepping, along her white skirts. She shook him off with a shriek of girlish terror, and looked on breathless while the negro gardener pursued the fleeing monster across the flags and crushed him with a heavy foot.

“*Matin : chagrin*,” she chanted, picking up the garden-shears which she had let fall in her fright, and snipping bud and blossom into the open basket on her arm. “*Matin : chagrin. Midi : ennui. Le soir : espoir*.”

“What do dat mean, you is singin’, Miss No-mee?” queried the old negro, leaning on his spade to listen. “Seem-lak I useter hear dat song, in de time — ”

The girl brightened. “Maybe you heard my mother sing it, Uncle Mink. *Dans le temps*,” she returned. “Sirène taught it to me. Sirène was also my mother’s *bonne*. It is *l’augure de l’araignée*,—the presage of the spider. In English it would go something like this:—

“*Spider in the morning: Of trouble the warning.*

Spider at noon: Satiety soon.

Spider at eve: Hope and believe.”

“Lawd, honey, you certing has got it pinterly down!” admired Uncle Mink. “’T ain’t edzackly cunjer—dat spider-song; but it’s sompin’ *lak* cunjer. Spiders,” he added thoughtfully, “is gener-ally *in* cunjerin’.”

The courtyard of the de Laussan mansion was filled with the soft glow of a sunny November morning. The tall bananas shading the fountain-pool set the rustle of their fringed leaves to a light breeze which blew up from the river and whiffled down the porte cochère, whose batten gate stood open to the street. There were cones

of white bells here and there among the Spanish daggers which leaned out at all angles from the foot of the north wall; a crêpe myrtle, on the high bricked-up bed against the south wall held aloft belated tufts of rosy bloom; the slim, naked trunk slanted silver-gray against a background of moss-patched stucco.

“It reminds me, somehow, that crêpe myrtle,” mused Noémie aloud, brushing from her hand the spider’s filmy broken rope, “of a greyhound.”

“Reckon hit *is* a greh-houn’,” remarked the old negro. “Tree by day, houn’ by night. Yas’m. Mars Dick useter tell about a houn’-dawg tu’nin’ into a tree. Caze he bark’ at a young lady whar was in swimmin’ in Little Otter Creek.” The latter part of this curious jumble of classic myths, with innovations, was chuckled by the narrator under his breath.

The roses in the garden-court were all old-fashioned: Gloire de Dijon, Cloth of Gold, Blush-cluster, Sanguinea, Lamasque, and the like; the prim flower beds were bordered with violets and Star-of-Bethlehem; there was a lavender-bush in one corner, and a mint bed behind the tall, taper-

ing green cistern. "Mars Dick planted dem ar yerbs hisse'f — fer yo' ma," said Uncle Mink, straightening his bent back and pointing a rusty forefinger vaguely about. "He fotch de fust roots f'um Ole Virginny wher we was bawn." Noémie had heard this statement at frequent intervals ever since she could remember; but it seemed forever new; it called up each time an enchanting vision of the dead father, dimly present to her memory, and of the beautiful young mother, known to her bodily eyes only by the portrait above the library mantel. She seemed to see the two together, stooping — always in the morning sunlight — to set in moist alien earth the homely slips which were to remind the Virginian of his birthplace.

"Becaze," continued Uncle Mink, according to custom, "I come into yo' fambly 'long o' yo' pa, honey. F'um Virginny."

"Yes, I know," cried the young girl, her lips parted eagerly, her smoke-blue eyes begging for more.

"You is de spi't'n image of Miss Mah-teel, chile, — clar to goodness, you is, — yaller hair an' all. An' dem eyes o' yo'n! Lawd, yo' ma's

eyes over agin. Mars Dick useter say dat Miss Mah-teel's eyes was lak de kiver mist over de Blue Ridge Mountains in fall-o-th'-year, sof'-lak, an' color o' smoke when blue sky shines th'oo. Yas'm."

Noémie Carrington had indeed inherited from Mathilde de Laussan, her mother, the crinkly, pale-gold tresses which waved and rippled above her white forehead, her clear, fair, colorless skin, her red lips, and her gray-blue eyes; Richard Carrington had given to his only child the buoyant slenderness of figure, the alert elasticity of motion, the patrician carriage of the women of his race. She had almost the look of an alien among her dark-haired, velvet-eyed, softly-rounded, slow-gliding creole kinswomen.

“She is a de Laussan — and a Destrehan — all the same,” triumphed Madame de Laussan, noting with delight from time to time some well-known or half-forgotten family peculiarity that showed itself in the child, the sole direct descendant of that dashing de Laussan who came over from France to the Province of Louisiana with the great Bienville, and who, like more than one of his line, — like Nemours de Laussan himself,

— had married a Destrehan, a descendant of his own brother-at-arms.

Noémie rested her basket on the ancient sundial, and stretched her arms, bared to the elbows, above her head. “I did not know that roses could be so heavy ! ” she laughed.

Uncle Mink dropped his spade with a clatter. “ Wher is dat no-count nigger-gal ? ” he growled. “ Ole Babe ! O-o-le B-a-a-a-be ! ” He lifted his mellow voice in a sonorous cry which re-echoed about the court. A negro girl about ten years old came, in a noiseless sort of jog-trot, through the wide gateway which opened upon a smaller inner court. She was surprisingly black, with egg-shaped eyes whose large, yellow pupils swam in a sea of bluish-white, a wide mouth perpetually opened in a perpetual grin, showing fence-like rows of even, white teeth, a flat nose, and a bulging forehead. The egg-shaped eyes twinkled with an intelligence almost uncanny ; when their lids were down and the grin in eclipse, an air of stupidity not to be described sat upon her face.

“ You triflin’ limb o’ Satan,” growled Uncle Mink, “ why ’n’t you heah to tote yo’ young mis-

tess's rose-basket into the gret-house ? Miss No-mee, dis is Ole Babe, one o' my gals. She ain't nothin' but a plantation-nigger yit. But she gwine to be handy, ef she git the strop. I brung her down f'um Lady's Rule to fetch an' carry fer Si-reen. Si-reen's gittin' ole. Hmp. 'Bout a hunderd, I spec."

"Old Babe?" Noémie looked down at the queer little figure standing at her knee. "But what is your name, child? Your real name?"

"Dess Ole Babe, li'l miss," drawled Sirène's assistant, shaking her head until the string-wrapped pigtails stood on end; "de twinses, dey come," — she indicated a pair of copper-hued pickaninnies clawing at her guinea-blue skirt, — "an' den dey was de baby, an' *I* hatter git out'n de way. So dey called me *Ole Babe*."

She ducked her head, beat off the twins with a skillful hand, seized the basket, poised it on her head, and trotted off.

"And these are twins. Yours, Uncle Mink? Dear me, I didn't know you had twins."

"T'ree pa'r, li'l miss. Yas'm. Dese two is gal an' boy. Ar-the-lia an' Sun-boy. I fotch 'im down f'um Lady's Rule yestiddy, to stay long

o' Ole Babe ontel my bride kin git ready fer de weddin'."

"Oh, *Uncle Mink!*" cried Noémie, suppressing a giggle. "You surely are not going to get married *again*."

"Oh, yes, I is, honey," returned the grizzled veteran promptly. "De Good Book say it ain't good fer man to live erlone. I follers de Holy Scripchers. I ain't nuver live' erlone; I done had fo' wives. Viny, she's onder groun'; de yethers dey—all quit. But I keeps de chillen' mo' or less. Yas'm. De bride, dis time, is Li'l Hannah; you 'member Li'l Hannah, Miss Noémee? Big Hannah's gal, at Lady's Rule. Li'l Hannah's jes' tu'ned o' fifteen. Oh, I always takes 'em young," he hastened to add, in response to an inarticulate remonstrance from his young mistress. "Dey bites an' dey scratches mo', but dey tames mo' easier dan ole ones. Yas'm. Dey tames mo' easier."

The bell on the street door rang; its clear, silvery tinkle broke upon the old man's droning monologue; the light echo rode airily upon the lower-keyed, indrifting sound-waves from the street. A quick tread sounded along the paved

corridor. Sidney Cortland, advancing, looked through the vaulted arch which framed a vista of the courtyard, where the slim, white-clad figure of Mademoiselle Carrington was outlined against the round of a mandarin orange tree, glossy-green in its painted tub. He experienced again the sensation which had possessed him that April morning some months earlier, when he had passed for the first time down the dim-lighted porte cochère of the de Laussan mansion. It had seemed to him then, as it did now, that he had in some previous existence traversed the same alley, hearing as he walked the same ripple of yellow Mississippi River water in the stone troughway at the foot of the wall; feeling in his face warm puffs of wind from the courtyard, with the scent upon them of blossoms hitherto unknown to him,—sweet-olive, *jasmin du Cap*, opopanax; divining rather than hearing, in the great rooms above, the mysterious movements of a life and a people to whose very tongue he was a stranger.

It was natural enough, this sensation. Even as a boy, the story of the old, foreign-looking house in the ancient foreign quarter of the far-away Southern city had fascinated him, falling

from the lips of his father,—Sidney Cortland, ex-colonel of the United States Army. The beautiful, pale chatelaine with the disdainful eyes and the scornful mouth; the tall slave-woman, a piece of living bronze, in her sombre skirts and plaided tignon, with barbaric hoops of gold in her ears and silver bracelets on her arms, and voodoo charms about her neck; the blonde-haired child asleep on her sofa; the high-ceilinged room with its rich, dark furniture, the portraits on the walls, the closed cabinets filled with rare trifles, the costly hangings, the subdued carpets;—all this had been woven, as it were, into the web of his childhood. Later, there had crept into the glamour another element; this quickened his pulse as he threw a glance in passing at the upward-leading stairway, sumptuous in its breadth and in its delicately wrought hand-rail and brass newel-post. It brought into his eyes, between their narrowing lids, a look utterly at variance with his singularly quiet, contained countenance. The look, enigmatic, untranslatable, might, nevertheless, have conveyed to a practiced physiognomist a suggestion of greed intermingled with triumph.

Miss Carrington greeted her visitor with a pleased smile. Cortland bowed gravely over the slim, white hand extended to meet his own.

“Exit the convent-pupil!” he said, with a nod toward the house, through whose wide-open arched windows could be seen professional decorators moving methodically about, stringing electric globes, hanging garlands, laying dancing-cloths, grouping palms and potted plants.

“Enter Mademoiselle de Laussan Carrington,” she flashed back, dropping a low curtsy which brought to his inner vision a swift picture of Madame de Laussan mocking Captain Cortland, U. S. A., with her rebel skirts. A secure half-smile stirred his lips. “Yes, monsieur, in me you behold a young lady.” She pronounced it *yong*, with a little slur over the consonants which Cortland found delicious. “To-night I make my *début*. A dinner and a ball; and myself at the very heart of both. Oh, but I tremble. I should like to run away!”

“Good! I will run away also with you,” cried Cortland in a stage whisper, feigning to interpose himself between the *débutante* and the stolid Uncle Mink. “Let us start at once.”

“On the instant, monsieur !” He drew her, laughing, in and out of the maze of sweet-olive and jessamine, along the formal walks, around the plant-girdled fountain pool.

He was accounted distinguished-looking rather than handsome, this son of the officer who some forty years before had, on one occasion at least, commanded Butler’s Provost Guard at New Orleans. (The fact of the relationship, it need hardly be said, remained carefully locked in the breast of the younger Cortland ; his father’s name, never known to Madame de Laussan, had upon his departure from the captured city dropped into oblivion there.) His tall, well-proportioned figure, slightly inclined to heaviness, was apt to attract instant notice ; his full, pale face, in spite of the mouth, whose short upper lip indicated weakness, conveyed a subtle suggestion of power ; his eyes, light blue beneath heavy black eyebrows, when not narrowed between their lids, had a frank expression which invited confidence.

A fortuitous circumstance had given him, soon after his arrival a stranger in the old town, the entrance, ardently desired, into the de Laussan house. Madame de Laussan one morning, de-

scending from her carriage, crossed the drenched banquette to her own door ; she stepped inadvertently upon a loose paving-stone, stumbled, and would have fallen but for Cortland who chanced to be passing,—Cortland, indeed, had spent much time already in passing and repassing the de Laussan mansion. He caught the slight form of his father's long-ago adversary in his arms, lifted her, moaning with pain from a twisted ankle, and bore her into her own house. Presentation later by a club acquaintance, who frankly disclaimed responsibility for the stranger's unknown antecedents, completed, somewhat irregularly, it is true, Cortland's mastery of the coveted foot-hold. Thenceforward he wrought patiently and tactfully to win the favor of Madame de Laussan, who was usually distrustful of all "outsiders." At this moment he felt warranted in congratulating himself on his success. Miss Carrington regarded him with a friendliness which, he knew, caused some comment among the other habitués of the house. Old Sirène muttered spitefully when she saw this *Yon-kee*—all unclassified strangers were *Yon-kees*—lounging about the chair of Madame de Laussan, or installed on

a garden bench beside Noémie. She refused his proffered gifts; she would have thrown the *wanga* on him had she dared. She gave no reason for her animosity; she had none to give!

“No!” declared Noémie, breathless, dropping upon a bench; “on second thoughts, I shall not run away — to-day. I stay. I desire to see with my own eyes how Miss Carrington will conduct herself at a dinner — *and* a ball! Still, I am horribly afraid.”

“You! the daughter of a hundred de Laussans and Destrehans!” jested Cortland, looking down upon her flushed, upturned face. “You! the possessor of uncounted thousands! the heiress of houses, jewels, sugar plantations —” His eyelids were unconsciously narrowing.

“Oh, that!” interrupted Noémie with disdain.

“That!” echoed Cortland, instantly normal again. “It is true,” he added, “that Miss Carrington needs neither stainless pedigree nor fabulous riches to make her —”

“A young person unused to flattery,” finished Noémie, lifting an arch forefinger in warning. “À ce soir, Monsieur Cortland,” — for the young man had arisen to take leave.

“*À ce soir*,” he repeated, stumbling a little over the unaccustomed phrase. “Then, we will elope to-morrow, mademoiselle,” he added lightly.

“Or the day after,” she assented, in the same tone. “Unless in the meantime the real Prince — ”

If the last playful suggestion jarred Cortland’s vanity, the impression was but momentary. A satisfied smile was already hovering upon his lip when he entered the corridor; and when, half-way along its shadowy arch, he turned, it was not to survey the girl, outlined as before against the glossy green of the mandarin, but to take in with half-closed eyes the carpeted stairway leading into the halls above, along which one passed from room to room into the presence of Madame de Laussan.

“Yas, chile,” Uncle Mink was saying, as if there had been no break in his confidences, “dey tames mo’ easier. Li’l Hannah ain’t got no hired education, but she kin cook. I was a fiel’-han’ myse’f back in Ole Virginny; but when Ole Mis’ seen me settin’ out dem yarbs yonder, she *dis-cover* dat I has a *good han’*; ever’t’ing I puts into de groun’ *grows*. Yas, honey, hit

grows. Dat hucom Ole Mis' keep me in town to gyarden fer her ; cep'n when I goes up to Lady's Rule to git married. I mos'ly keeps my wives an' my chillen up at Lady's Rule. Hit's mo' safer."

The garrulous tongue clattered on. Noémie thrust a handful of violets into her belt, and strolled toward the house.

"*Matin : chagrin*," she murmured lightly ; "what disaster, I wonder, will mar my entrance into the world — into real life ! Perhaps the soup will be spoiled at the dinner ; or l'oncle Grandchamps will quarrel with Monsieur Paturin about Napoleon ; or there will be a crush at the ball ; or there will be no one ; or — fearful thought ! — I will have no partners. *Matin : chagrin*."

She passed, singing, up the grand stair.

III

DANS LE TEMPS

THE dinner was drawing to a close; so far, there had been nothing to justify the descent from nowhere, a few hours earlier, of a certain fat, ominous spider. Madame de Laussan presided, stately in velvet and ancestral laces, wearing upon her abundant snow-white hair the famous de Laussan tiara of diamonds. The table, with its rare appointment of crystal and silver, its exquisite napery, choice flowers,—even its wines,—met the approval of Major Léon Grandchamps, late of the Confederate States Army, that handsome grizzled connoisseur whose presence was equally sought after and dreaded by the dinner-givers of the *Vieux Carré*.

“Ah!”—Miss Carrington settled back in her chair. “L’oncle Grandchamps has begun to recall *dans le temps*! This means,” she breathed into the ear of her left-hand neighbor, “that as a dinner-party we are a success. *Dieu merci.*”

The neighbor, Donald Strang, assumed an attitude of respectful attention, his face turned toward the rigid disciplinarian of the old school; but he looked sidewise at Noémie. "She looks, somehow, different from the others," he decided within himself. "What is it which makes her — different?"

Perhaps it was the fair head set like a flower on the milk-white neck; the other young heads were all dark by contrast, even Frances Heron's, which passed elsewhere for blonde, Don's own red mane, and the brown, close-cut crop of Sidney Cortland. The light streaming downward from the crystal chandeliers was hardly more palely golden than the soft nimbus crowning her brow.

"You must not talk," Noémie admonished the young man on her right, for Monplaisir had leaned toward her and opened his lips to speak; "not to be listened to sours the wine of l'oncle Grandchamps, and then he and Monsieur Paturin quarrel about General Bonaparte. Besides," she added with demure gravity, "the young learn by listening."

"For myself, *ma cousine*, I prefer to be old

and to learn by looking," returned Félix Monplaisir gallantly, sweeping her with an openly admiring glance.

"*Dans le temps*," Major Grandchamps was saying oracularly, "when those electric bogg had their abode in the cyprière, and the timber for those electric car-r was in the a-cor-rn," — he shifted easily from English to French, and back again as he proceeded, according as his eyes chanced to fall upon American or Creole,— "when some of us were young, eh, Paturin?— and there were such lips and such eyes in the *corbeille* at the *Théâtre de l'Opéra* as the degenerates of this day have not the red blood to imagine! when you felt the beat of your heart to the tips of your fingers; when you drained your glass without asking leave of your stomach! *dans le temps* —"

"Which is as much as to say 'befo' the wah,'" murmured Tom Masters into the air.

Exactly! the veteran had mounted his hobby, and was galloping gayly back into a day when the sun really revolved around the earth. Who that lived then does not know it, as it were, by heart,—that golden time of youth and romance,

and large leisure, and easy credit! The time of mint-julep, and foxhound, and *colichemarde*! Of unrivaled women and adventurous men! *Dans le temps!* But yes!

“The war, our war—not that bagatelle of a Spanish-American,” said Monsieur Alcide Paturin, in the thin, pleasant tones which accorded with his profession: he was an *avocat*. Yet, small, shrunken, and old as he now was, leathery and musty in the midst of leathery pamphlets and musty title-deeds, Paturin had been in '61 a *chasseur à pied* in baggy trousers and a red sash; a fighter, too, of the best. “That Civil War illuminated the death-bed of the Old Régime. The New? Bah! It is of a commercialism to poison the air we breathe.”

The younger guests, seeing that Paturin had been allowed to enter the arena, felt themselves released; there was instant resumption of light chatter about the lower end of the long oval.

“Do you know, Noémie,” called Jeanne Berthet across the central mound of roses, “who has come to that United States Barrack—Jackson Barrack—down the river? Maxime Allard. None other.”

Noémie flushed slightly. "Truly?" she cried. "I thought he was in the Philippines."

"So he has been. But at present, behold him returned, a captain in the artilleree. Shoulder-straps and all. *Il est beau comme un ange* in his uniform."

"Sh! Sh!" warned Madame Berthet, her mother (born Grandchamps), with a glance at the white heads at the upper end of the oval. "You forget that the father of Maxime, le Colonel Allard, was comrade to my papa in that Confederate war. Papa, therefore, does not pardon him for allowing Maxime to enter *l'école militaire de West Point*. Neither does he pardon Maxime—"

"All the same, he has done something wonderful in the Philippines, Maxime, and he dances adorably," persisted Jeanne.

"In—this—very—house, Goddam!" The table shook under a blow, thrice repeated, from the fist of Major Grandchamps; the crystal pendants of the candelabra tinkled musically, half a dozen slender-stemmed wineglasses toppled over, spilling their amber contents on the cloth.

Noémie turned pale. "I knew it!" she con-

fided desperately to Strang. "Monsieur Paturin and l'oncle Grandchamps are quarreling. The great Napoleon has arrived. But no. It is only the Yankee captain and the Provost Guard." Again she settled back, relieved, in her chair; and again there was respectful silence. For Major Grandchamps was telling the "Story of the Sword."

"It belonged to the Marquis de Lafayette," he continued, "by whom it was worn during the War of the Revolution, when France so nobly came to the aid of those American colonies. The Marquis presented it to his friend and aide-de-camp, Louis Destrehan, the ancestor of *madame ma cousine*." The speaker paused, arose deliberately from his chair and leaned forward to take in his own the jeweled hand of Madame de Laussan, and to set his moustached lips upon the satin-white finger tips. "Her father, falling at the Battle of New Orleans, gave it, blood-stained, to his friend Pierre de Laussan, who, holding it aloft, led his command to victory. It is a sword of honor, that sword. The jeweled hilt surmounts a Toledo blade of the first quality — long, flexible, slender. Hilt and scabbard bear the fleur-

de-lys of France. A precious souvenir in the famille Destrehan-de-Laussan. It was presented by General Pierre de Laussan to his grandson," — the major paused and lowered his head reverently — "to Pierre de Laussan, the only son of Nemours de Laussan and his wife, *madame ma cousine*." Again the *vieux moustache* arose from his chair to bend over the jeweled hand of his kinswoman ; it trembled in his grasp. "The great war — our war — breaks out," he continued, standing in military erectness, and speaking with rapid, dramatic utterance ; " Nemours de Laussan is already at the forefront of his country's defense. His son, Pierre, though but a child, has the consent of a patriotic mother to join that gallant father. He is at the moment of bidding her farewell. He is in hiding, here in the hôtel de Laussan — for those despicable Yankees have possession of our city, and there are spies everywhere, — spies hiding in the courtyard of your house ; spies behind the portières of your salon ; spies under the table in your bureau, spies at the crack of your door, at your heel, at your elbow — black spies, white spies — the white are the worst, Goddam ! They bring their lies to

that degraded Provost Marshal; he sends his vile scum of a guard. It is infamous! The *pauvre enfant*, I tell you, is in the act of receiving upon his brow the holy embrace of his mother. That guard enters—this—very—house—” Again the table dances under the blow, thrice repeated, of the major’s clenched fist; and again wine-glasses topple over; one in front of Cortland has its slender foot broken, the fragments rolling to the polished floor. “Those *âmes-de-boue* of Yankee soldiers are commanded by a captain who has the face of a villain, Goddam!” The speaker’s eyes, which glared in their deep sockets, were fixed unconsciously upon Cortland, who listened with an air of detached interest. “A ferocious villain. But when he reached the library where *madame ma cousine* stands, protected only by her sacred womanhood,—aha! the young eaglet has flown. And he has taken from its place on the wall the sword of Lafayette. He finds time and place, in the midst of his hurried flight, to hide that venerated sword, that the hand of an enemy may not pollute it, hilt or blade. He raises it aloft in a last salute to his mother, as he passes—forever, *hélas!*

— from her sight. Enough, my friends.” The deep voice, become husky, ceased a moment; the old man drew the back of his hand, unashamed, across his dimmed eyes. “Since forty years,” he resumed, “that sword remains hidden where Pierre placed it, somewhere in this house; for the boy — killed in the defense of his country — has never revealed the secret of its hiding-place. I have myself sought it — vainly. So have many others. Sometimes,” the old voice trailed on, slowly now, and dreamily, “I picture to myself that brave young scion of the famille Des-trehan-de-Laussan coming up at midnight from the cimetière St. Louis, where he sleeps, to take the old sword he so honored, from its unknown refuge, and to pass with it, head aloft, through the well-remembered house where he was born —”

“*Léon, pour l’amour de Dieu!*” Madame de Laussan had arisen from her chair; her hands were outstretched in trembling entreaty; her white face a prey to agonized emotions, long dormant.

“Major Grandchamps,” Strang broke upon the painful silence in a matter-of-fact tone, though his hand, grasping the back of Noémie’s chair,

shook a little, “I lay you a wager, ten to one if you will, that I find that sword — provided, of course, that Madame de Laussan shall grant me the right of search — ”

“I also claim the grace of a like wager,” cried Monplaisir.

“And I,” proffered Masters. The tense moment was tided over.

Monsieur Paturin had forced Madame de Laussan very gently back into her seat. Major Grandchamps, still breathing heavily, was begging her pardon in undertone.

“And I also,” remarked Paturin. “Only, messieurs, if I, groping about the attics through those trapdoors known to Hercule, or climbing to the belvidere up forgotten stairways, shall unearth the sword of Lafayette, I shall claim as a reward the hand of Mademoiselle Noémie de Laussan Carrington.”

A laugh went around the table.

“A good suggestion, Monsieur Paturin,” said Madame de Laussan, making a visible effort to recover her self-control. “Hear, messieurs! The hand of Mademoiselle Carrington shall be the guerdon of him who finds the Lafayette sword.”

“A dangerous promise, Laure, and a rash, though it be only in jest,” interposed Major Grandchamps, with the irritability which is apt to follow great mental excitement.

Madame de Laussan was herself suffering the anti-climax of painful emotion. “I am not jesting,” she declared haughtily. “I swear it—by the Holy Virgin.” She raised her voice in obstinate repetition. “The hand of Mademoiselle de Laussan Carrington shall be the reward of him who finds the sword of Lafayette, hidden in 1862 by my son, Pierre de Laussan.”

“The quest is open to all?” demanded Cortland, who had hitherto remained silent.

“Yes, monsieur, to all.”

“For a Year and a Day,” amended Noémie laughing; “like the Quest of the Grail.” She gave her arm, as she spoke, to her grandmother.

“A woman in a million, *madame ma cousine*,” remarked Major Grandchamps, when the portière had dropped behind them; “but of a temper to intimidate the devil. It will be the death of her.”

“It keeps her alive,” returned Paturin, filling his glass, drop by drop, with the practiced hand of a *bon viveur*.

IV

PIERRE'S TERRACE

MISS CARRINGTON led the way, lifting here a silken curtain, there skirting a palm-shaded recess, traversing unsuspected passages, skimming through oddly-set rooms, deserted but aglow with light. Cortland followed, casting as he went speculative glances around. The echo of dance music came after them, with the softened murmur of many voices, the rhythmic beat of young feet upon polished floors — for the ball was at its height. The girl paused at length, and turned a dance-flushed face over her shoulder. “Here, Mr. Cortland, you will find that breath of fresh air for which you offer your soul.”

“It is worth it,” Cortland returned, stepping through the French window after her, and drawing into his lungs a full inspiration of dewy, flower-scented night air.

“Since the contract remains unsigned,” she laughed.

A marble balustrade, discolored by time, en-

closed the wide terrace, or loggia, upon which they stood ; a short flight of steps, also of marble, broken and worn, led down into the small inner court, faced on one side by the stable, coach- and toolhouse. Low benches were set against the stuccoed wall of the house ; one end of the terrace was closed by a flower-box, — a sort of brick and stucco sarcophagus, — from which a giant plumbago tossed down the outer slope a cascade of feathery leafage starred with clusters of blossom, — pale-blue by daylight, but under the full moon ghostly white. A border of sweet alyssum hung, ragged, over the inner edge of the box ; huge urns, also funereal in suggestion, flanked the marble steps on either side : these gave out the heavy scent of the Grand Duke jessamine.

“ How picturesque ! ” exclaimed Cortland.

“ The terrace ? Is n’t it ! ” Noémie sank lightly upon the bench, her white draperies fluffing around her. “ It is called Pierre’s Terrace, because it was here that Hercule — the negro who managed the escape — found my little uncle Pierre the day the Yankees came to arrest him. He was sitting right where I am sitting now, waiting, his pistol in his hand — ”

“The sword upon his knee,” interjected Cortland flippantly.

She was too absorbed to note his tone. “The sword? He had already hidden the sword; Hercule never saw it. Hercule jumped from the balusters to the wall yonder, and drew my uncle up after him. I can see it all as if it were under my eyes! Then they climbed somehow to the little jutting balcony,—you may see the corner of it from where you stand,—and so into the old turret-schoolroom, and out upon the roof. That Yankee officer was in a fine rage,” she added gleefully, “when he found that his prey had escaped. Hercule described it all to my grandmother. She gave him the last gold-piece she possessed. He had a handful of silver, besides, from the Yankee captain,—in payment for his services as a guide to the *hôtel de Laussan*.”

“The scoundrel!” ejaculated Cortland involuntarily.

“Hercule? Do you think him a scoundrel? Hercule!” She looked up in naïve surprise. “We regard him as a saint—almost. A little—crooked—to the enemy, if you will; but incapable of betraying his master. I never saw him—

dear old Hercule; it all happened ages before I was born, of course. There are many of his kind among us, even yet,—loyal to the core to the families who once owned them, or their fathers and their mothers. However, you of the North cannot, of course, understand — ”

“ I am not a Northern man,” interrupted Cortland shortly; “ I was born in the South—in this state. So was my father before me. My people — ” he stopped abruptly, biting his lips. Secretive by nature and habit, the inherited antagonism of the Southern poor-white to the ’ris-tocrat, and his apparently instinctive antagonism to the negro who despises him, had broken an overlaid crust and betrayed the young man into an admission which he was far from intending to make. His discomfort communicated itself to his companion.

“ Oh ! ” she said, confused, without knowing why, “ then yours is a return of the native ! Welcome home, monsieur ! But come,”—she arose,— “ our five minutes’ leave must be long over. We shall have a phalanx of chaperones upon us ! Besides, my waltzes will be in a hopeless tangle.”

Fair as she was, standing before him, white-

clad, dream-like in the moonlight, Cortland, for the moment, was hardly aware of her fairness,—even of her presence. By one of those flashes, set loose by a chance word, a gesture, a glance, which at times illumine a whole forgotten past, there unrolled before his inner vision a rapid panorama of his own life: he saw, vividly projected against the background of shiftless cabin and unkempt field, the motherless, barefoot boy, shunned by his own kind as the son of a "renegade;" absolutely non-existent for that higher world gathering itself together with patrician insolence from the wreck of the Civil War; jeered at by the negroes, who held themselves, as always, above his class, and who had, besides, a curious contempt for the Southern man "turned Yankee"—even to break their own yoke of slavery! He followed in fancy the career of the boy himself: as a petty clerk in the far-off Western town whither his father, ex-colonel U. S. A., had removed. He tracked the unprincipled clerk into the adventurer, the dead-beat, gambler, spendthrift; of later years the — He faced the girl suddenly in a sort of fury; a demand from her of payment for all he had endured, all he had

had, all he had not had, struggled to his lips and well-nigh burst forth. She drew back, paling a little under his violent glance. He recovered himself. “Pierre’s Terrace!” He turned, lingeringly, to follow her into the house. “So the Yankee officer looted the *hôtel de Laussan!*” he laughed. “Did he by chance carry away anything of importance? Papers?”

“Oh, no,” returned Noémie carelessly, “the de Laussan jewels were too safely hidden away for even his greedy eyes. And, as my grandmother said, the loss of the de Laussan diamonds would have been a trifle compared with my little uncle Pierre’s safety.”

“Madame de Laussan is doubtless rich enough to support such a loss.”

Again Cortland bit his lip, subtly aware that in the de Laussan world such a remark would have been ticketed as vulgar.

But Noémie had not heard. She had paused on the threshold of the French window, and stood listening; a smile parted her red lips.

From the servants’ quarters, invisible from the inner court, came floating the long-drawn, plaintive notes of a “spiritual” sung by Old Babe.

The violins from the other direction, though they flung into the advancing night the sensuous strains of a waltz, bore up the weird melody strangely.

*Look to yo' foot, ez you trabble on de way,
Walk wa-ry.*

*Fer de Snake is in de Grass at de een o' de day,
Walk wa-ry.*

Then, to the drumming of bare feet on the floor, and in a staccato movement that suggested the tam-tam and the gourd-rattle : —

*Snake in de Grass, kill um ! kill um !
Stomp on he haid twell he die.
Stomp, stomp, s-t-o-m-p !*

The song ended abruptly, parting with a shriek from the ballroom waltz.

“They have a curious effect on me, those negro melodies,” Noémie said, moving on. “They seem to transport me into some mysterious region where are dim, formless shapes and half-remembered sounds. I suppose it is an inheritance, so to speak, from my foster-mother, Sirène.”

“Doubtless,” agreed Cortland. He drew her ungloved hand through his arm, bending keen eyes as he did so upon the tapering, ringless fingers with their shell-like nails.

V

THE BOX

A PRETTY enough *corbeille!*" Major Grand-champs spoke with kindly condescension. He surveyed the house through his opera-glasses, removing them from moment to moment to bow in the direction of an open box, or a *loge grillée*. "Not comparable, certainly, to the *corbeille* of *dans le temps*. But, creditable. Creditable."

The great auditorium presented, tier upon tier, a spectacle of dazzling splendor. That exuberant fancy which had likened the general effect of the horseshoe filled with women in radiant toilettes, resplendent in jewels, to a basket of flowers, did not seem far-fetched at this *ouverture* of the French opera season. The curtain had fallen, amid an uproar of applause, on the first act of *Les Huguenots*; and the small army of men supporting the boxes — standing several rows deep, a black fringe against the curving wall — had swarmed forward, sudden as a flight of bees,

to hover over “bud” and full-blown flower in *loge découverte* or *grillée*, or *baignoire*.

Major Grandchamps stood in the rear of the proscenium-box where Madame Berthet, his daughter — a suave and smiling, but alert guardian — presided over the destinies of the *jeunes filles* in her care. He frowned, stroking his gray moustache with a gloved hand, in the effort to crystallize the vague memory stirred by the entrance of a young man in correct evening dress, who bowed before him, and half extended, half withdrew his hand with a confused air, passing on to the circle gathering about Miss Carrington. “Where the devil have I met him?” the major muttered. “Fine-looking fellow, *parole d’honneur*. Looks like a soldier.”

The newcomer was, in fact, a soldier. Maxime Allard, smiling under Jeanne Berthet’s gay railery, but bending grave eyes upon his old play-fellow, Noémie Carrington, recalled to the major, had he but known it, his sometime comrade-in-arms and now bitter enemy, Colonel Fernand Allard, late of the Confederate States Army!

As the young officer advanced, the others drew aside, according to the strict code of the entr’-

acte. He had been wondering for the past half-hour, watching Noémie from his chair in the parquet, what he should say first when he came into her presence after so many years of absence. He was, truth to say, not sure whether—seeing that the Grandchamps-Allard feud, of which he was the more or less innocent cause, closed to him the doors of the Grandchamps connection—he ought to enter her box at all! He asked himself many times afterward what had prompted him to demand, looking down into her flushed face: “And the sword of Lafayette? Has it ever been found? Do you remember, Noémie—Miss Carrington,” he had continued, half in embarrassment, “how you and I and Jeanne used to follow l'oncle Grandchamps and Monsieur Paturin, or old Mink, or Sirène, about from ground-floor to attic in order to be in at the finding of the sword?”

“And how Noémie regularly offered her allowance to St. Anthony of Padua for even the slightest clue? It is true that Noémie’s allowance was always spent long in advance—for *dragées*. Perhaps the saint suspected that. At least, he never furnished the clue!”

“For shame, Jeanne!” laughed Noémie. “Yes, I remember. And even when you were a big boy — Captain Allard — searching on your own account, once you tumbled into a cobwebbed *oubliette* and had to be dragged out by the heels !”

“All that was before West Point, alas!” murmured Allard. “Now, I fear —” He glanced at the major in the rear of the box, who, having at length placed him, was scowling at him furiously.

“No, it has never been found,” Noémie said.

“And you must know, Maxime,” interrupted Jeanne, “that the hand of Mademoiselle Noémie de Laussan Carrington, with or without her heart, is the prize offered for the restoration of that sword. Madame de Laussan, *ma tante*, has sworn it by the crown of the Virgin — no longer ago than last night. The aspirants are already in evidence. They choke the halls of the hôtel de Laussan ; the stairways resound under their feet. Even Monsieur Alcide Paturin has entered the lists.”

“And you, Miss Carrington ? Are you also pledged to this compact ?”

She flashed an enigmatic glance upon him before replying. "I? I am bound at least for a Year and a Day."

Monplaisir had joined the group. He laid an arm familiarly across Allard's shoulder. "You are barred by your uniform, *mon vieux*. Our fiery old dragon of an uncle yonder will guard the door of the hôtel de Laussan with blade and flame."

"All the same," cried Allard gayly, "I enroll myself in the Legion: I will follow the Quest if I have to break my way into the house by the roof — as Pierre de Laussan broke his way out!"

"Who is the man yonder, just quitting the de Laussan box?" demanded Cortland of the heavy-set, florid man who stood beside him in the slowly regathering fringe opposite, — for a traditional knocking behind the scenes had announced the imminent rise of the curtain.

"Which one? Patterson, I think. Oh, no, it is Allard, an army officer; a captain, I believe. He has just come back from the Philippines. Belongs to one of the old Creole families —"

"Drop that, will you!" growled Cortland; "I am sick of your old Creole families, your *ancien régime*, your befo' the wah aristocracy."

He mimicked cleverly certain well-known social lights. "Here ; let's get out. The whole thing bores me to death."

"Lord, Sid," ejaculated his companion, "I thought you liked it — and them!" He indicated the horseshoe in a comprehensive nod. "D—d if I did n't! You 've got to be such a swell since we come to New Orleans! Get out? You bet! I 've been ready to quit ever since that bandy-legged little tenor began to bawl. But, say, ain't you going to sachey round to the prosceenium box first?"

"I have been," snorted Cortland, beginning to elbow his way through the fringe. He had been! And he smarted still with the remembrance of his own dumb awkwardness as he had stood in the half-circle of men ranged in front of Noémie Carrington, tossing the airy bubble of periflage back and forth among themselves, dropping it from moment to moment to her hand, catching it deftly in its return flight. The ease and grace of it all! Cortland glared at Donald Strang,— one of 'em, curse him! — who chanced to be in his path.

He got on well enough with women, he re-

flected without conceit. Women liked him ; a certain bravado, easily construed into manliness, a brusqueness which hinted at restrained power ; a gift for silence at times which indicated depth, — and mystery ! — these carried him easily among women. He felt himself judged more severely by these suave, keen-eyed men of the world, who appraised bravado and brusqueness at their true value. He was ill at ease in their company, handicapped as he was by the ineradicable suspicion of the caste, which was his heritage.

“I have been,” he repeated savagely, “and I have had enough.”

The two men stood for a moment under the open arcade of the Opera House ; then, walking to the corner, they plunged into a side street lighted for several blocks by myriads of carriage lamps, pair after pair, one behind another, like eyes starring the darkness. Beyond, the intricacies of unpaved cross streets and gloom-wrapped alleys.

The de Laussan library, the next morning, was filled with agreeable warmth from a small wood

fire which burned in the open fireplace ; the crackling flames, leaping above the tall fire-dogs, were reflected in the brass fender and in the mirror-like polish of cabinets, bookcases, and tables. A flood of sunshine poured in from the east windows, illuminating the pictured faces of hawk-eyed Destrehan and debonair de Laussan on the walls. Madame de Laussan, erect in her high-backed chair, her slim hands folded on her lap, listened with almost wistful eagerness to Madame Berthet's account of Noémie's triumphs at *l'ouverture*.

The old madame retained to an extraordinary degree that imperious beauty which, in the early forties of the nineteenth century, had stirred New Orleans—and Paris—to enthusiasm. The lines etched by time and suffering around her mouth and her dark eyes—the Destrehan eyes—gave an added distinction to the high-bred face.

“I wish you would tell me your secret, *marraine!*” sighed Madame Berthet, rising to go. “I have thirty years less than you have ; but, *ma foi*, I look a hundred. It is true that I have Jeanne—who is of a giddiness ! and Félix, my

nephew, always running into debt ; and the six younger children, — besides papa who keeps no hours, — but *laissons là*. Be content, *chère marraine*, Noémie is superb. Like her mother. When I see Noémie, I see Mathilde ! ”

“ Mathilde ! ” breathed Madame de Laussan, when the door had closed upon her visitor. She looked long and steadily at the portrait above the mantel. “ There is not a soul alive who knows, besides ourselves, Sirène,” she mused softly, “ unless, the letter — ”

Sirène, crouched on the rug, was stroking the small, slippers feet resting on her lap. “ It was a lie,” she said, in the *nègre* unmodified by years.

Younger than her mistress by a dozen years, Sirène, like her, had kept the slim, straight figure, the fine poise of head, the statuesque repose of youth ; the lines of age were even more lightly drawn on her dark, sphinx-like face. “ Me, I always knew it was a lie.”

“ God be thanked, it never darkened *her* life. She never knew of it. And not even the shadow of it remains to trouble her child — my little Noémie. Ah, God be praised ! ” Both women crossed themselves fervently.

Madame de Laussan's long-drawn sigh of relief had hardly fluttered from her lips, when she felt a tension in Sirène's body which jerked the mulattress to her knees; her own hand was clutched in a convulsive grasp of the brown fingers. "My God, 'Tite Maîtresse, the Yankee Captain! — little Master Pierre! — General Butler's Guard" — stammered Sirène incoherently, her jaws fallen, her eyes starting from her head.

Cortland, dropping the portière behind him, stood in the exact spot where his father had paused on that unforgotten day. He held his hat in his hand; the dark blue caped top-coat he wore added to the momentary illusion.

Madame de Laussan, turning in her chair, saw him. The terror awakened by Sirène's outcry gave place to an almost hysterical amusement. "Monsieur Cortland!" she exclaimed, rising and advancing a step; "you are welcome. It is indeed charitable of you to remember the existence of an old woman like myself, after the dissipation of last night."

"After the dissipation of last night." Cortland repeated the words mechanically. He walked

forward with deliberation, slipping his hand into the inner pocket of his coat as he advanced.

“Pray be seated, monsieur.” Madame de Laussan waved him to a chair and returned to her own, tactfully unobservant of his pale face, disordered locks, and bloodshotten eyes.

“I desire to see you alone, madame,” he said, declining the chair and standing over her, tall and sombre. Underneath his top-coat, his evening clothes were visible, crumpled and awry: his shirt front was stained as if by wine.

“I have no secrets from Sirène,” returned Madame de Laussan haughtily, yet softening a little. She had never liked him, this intruder without a background, forced upon her by common decency of feeling. Yet it was natural, inevitable, indeed! that he should love Noémie; and that he should come, poor devil, to ask for Noémie’s—

“Leave the room!” He addressed Sirène with harsh abruptness.

“I ris-seive my h’orders from my meestrees.” Sirène’s head went up as haughtily as that of Madame de Laussan herself.

“Go, Sirène. Mademoiselle Noémie will be waking, and needing you.”



SIDNEY CORTLAND

Madame de Laussan smiled indulgently at her visitor. The mulattress left the room instantly, but not without a glance of veiled insolence toward Cortland.

“Pray be seated, monsieur,” repeated Madame de Laussan.

Again Cortland ignored the invitation. “I come,” he began slowly, as if choosing his words or rehearsing a speech previously composed, “to restore to the famille de Laussan certain objects which are doubtless of small intrinsic value; but which, nevertheless —” he drew his hand from his breast-pocket, “nevertheless —”

Madame de Laussan uttered a cry. The small box lying in his open palm was of tortoise-shell inlaid with gold,—obviously one of those ancient snuff-boxes designed for royal presentation; it bore upon the lid a medallion miniature of Louis XIV set in brilliants.

“How came this in your possession, Monsieur Cortland?” demanded Madame de Laussan, reaching out a trembling hand to receive it. He drew back, tapping the lid with an unsteady finger as he spoke:—

“Doubtless you may with an effort recall,

madame, the visit made you some forty years ago by a certain Yankee captain,—a morning call, I believe; it was before I was born!"

Madame de Laussan had sprung to her feet; she stood facing him, transfixed with horror.

"That Yankee," he dwelt upon the words, "chanced to be my father—Captain Sidney Cortland of the United States Army; in command, at the moment which I have the honor to recall to you, of Butler's Provost Marshal Guard. He died years ago. I beg you to do him the justice to believe that he regretted the impulse which led him to carry away this trifle—for so it was, among the many costly objects which went into the pockets of his men. He—appropriated—it for a souvenir of—for the girl, afterward my mother,"—Cortland's sneering tone faltered a little,— "to whom he was at that time engaged. I do not think he ever gave it to her; she never spoke of it. He charged me on his deathbed to restore it to you, if you were in the land of the living. I should have done so earlier, I admit. But—" He shrugged his shoulders and left the sentence unfinished. "You will find the contents intact, I believe: two seal rings, a small ebony cross

bearing upon a silver bar the initials L. D., and an uncut stone—a sapphire, I think."

He gave the box, with an exaggerated bow, into the outstretched hand. Madame de Laussan opened it with eager fingers, and took out one by one the objects mentioned.

"And—the letter?" she asked, her voice dropped to an agonized whisper.

"Oh, there was a letter? Since you mention it, I remember there *was* a letter." His smile was somewhat overdone. "Let me see, from—the name of the writer has slipped my memory for the moment. It was addressed to you? Yes, so it was."

"Monsieur Cortland,"—Madame de Laussan had suddenly pulled herself together; she spoke quietly, and with a coolness which surpassed his own,—"you can have but one motive in withholding a paper in which you have no personal interest. I hesitate to charge you with that motive, even now, knowing at last that you are the son of your father. If I am mistaken, I ask your forgiveness. Your appearance, your story, have brought back to me memories which— But no matter. Am I right, monsieur, in suggesting

that you desire in exchange for the letter which you have in your hand”—Cortland had drawn from his breast pocket a yellowed, oblong slip of paper with dark seal, and was holding it ostentatiously—“a consideration?”

Cortland laughed recklessly; the veneer of refinement had dropped from him, body and soul, like a garment. He looked vulgar and commonplace in his unmeet garb; his eyes leered satyr-like between thin, half-closed lids.

“You are quite correct, madame,” he said, again bowing low before her; “as I am not, myself, the member of an old Creole family, I need not beat about the bush. This letter, which, as you are aware, affects the happiness, the social standing, of Miss Noémie de Laussan Carrington,”—the ugly sneer curled his lip,—“this important document is—for—sale.”

Madame de Laussan stiffened perceptibly.

“Blackmail? Certainly! You can buy it, or Major Grandchamps, your fastidious kinsman, within forty-eight hours. Otherwise a copy of it, attested, will be mailed to every family in your aristocratic circle before—”

“What is your price?” interrupted Madame

de Laussan curtly. Cortland, hardened as he was, dropped his eyes before the undisguised contempt in hers. But his effrontery returned immediately.

“ My price ? The document goes dirt-cheap to the owner of the de Laussan diamonds, which the Yankee captain failed to find ! My price is twenty thousand dollars.”

Madame de Laussan’s hand on the back of the chair beside her tightened its grasp ; her throat contracted ; she remained silent. Cortland, amazed at his own audacity, watched her, in a panic lest he had, after all, overreached himself.

“ I will give you fifteen thousand dollars.”

The words came in the even, measured voice which the speaker was wont to use. The man recognized finality in the business-like tone. “ After all,” he reflected, “ fifteen thousand is not bad. Gad, I can splurge on what is left after my debts of honor — Besides, there may be another throw.”

“ The letter is worth twice that sum, madame,” he said aloud. “ But considering the anguish you suffered — forty years ago — at the hands of my father, I accept — as a compromise — your offer.”

A movement of the head indicated the assent of his victim.

“It is now eleven o’clock,” — he took out his watch, — “eleven o’clock, Tuesday. At this hour on Saturday next, — giving you, as you see, plenty of time, — I will, as the collectors say, call again. Or stay, I have an engagement at that hour. Shall we say three in the afternoon? Very well. Pray present my compliments to Miss Noémie. She was quite the belle at the opera last night.”

Madame de Laussan had seated herself, and, with her face turned to the fire, was apparently unconscious of his presence. He stood about awkwardly. “Cash money, madame, remember!” He tapped the letter, which gave out a whispering rustle under his touch, and returned it to his pocket. He took out his cigarette case. To his own astonishment, he found himself ashamed to light the cigarette between his teeth. He swaggered to the door, but came back and planted himself, feet wide apart, on the rug beside the armchair and its occupant. “Say,” he said, looking down at the still figure, “on second thoughts, I will take that money in two payments. Seven and a half thousand Saturday at

three o'clock ; seven and a half thousand — let me see — this is November seventeenth ; December, January,” — he checked the months off on his fingers, — “ the remaining seven and a half thousand at the end of five months, namely, on the seventeenth of April, nineteen hundred and three, at three o'clock in the afternoon. In the mean time,” he added insolently, “ my footing in the house will remain — undisturbed.”

Madame de Laussan had reached the limit of endurance ; she touched a bell. “ Conduct monsieur,” she said to the man servant when he appeared. “ Until Saturday, Monsieur Cortland,” she added, forcing a smile.

VI

A FRUITLESS STROLL

MAXIME ALLARD, Captain U. S. A., walked with a loitering step, unusual to him, along Rue Royale. He stopped to gaze into the show-windows of *monts de piété*, seeming to the passers-by, doubtless, to be speculating on the history of necklet, prayer-beads, or pendant earring,—plainly once the property of some reduced gentlewoman of the Quarter. He glanced in the antique shops which line the way of the ancient thoroughfare; he lingered on one corner to buy a boutonnière, and upon another to bandy compliments with the leathery-looking Toto, praline-seller, whom he remembered from his Jesuit College days. He made small headway in his journey, wherever that might tend. The truth is, the youthful officer was following Hope, the bright-footed, often, alas, the deceitful. It was but reasonable to suppose—given an afternoon like this, with a hazy, lazy sun overhead, and a

Gulf wind just moist enough to freshen her cheeks — that Miss Carrington would be abroad. He walked back, a block or two, toward Canal Street, rapidly, as if he had forgotten something, or left his umbrella against a counter, and returned loitering as before, buying a fresh boutonnière and dropping other nickels into Toto's basket. Finally, with a glance of discouragement at the de Laussan mansion across the way, particularly at those upper windows (closed) which might be Noémie's own, he walked on. It was possible — he hastened his steps at the thought — that Noémie might be in the Cathedral St. Louis. He smiled, remembering a devout little Noémie, giving thanks before the altar for the recovery of her doll from the measles, for the return of Sirène's lost St. Joseph in his leaden box, for the lesson learned, the scale accomplished! But Noémie was not in the dim old cathedral. The promenade had now become aimless. "It will not be for to-day," the captain at last admitted with a sigh. At that moment, glancing along a side street, he saw the de Laussan carriage with its dun-colored horses, 'Polyte on the box, waiting, doubtless, for Miss Carrington.

ton at her dressmaker's. He strolled nonchalantly along the opposite banquette. But, certainly, Noémie would be coming out presently !

The thought had hardly leaped exultant into his mind when the door, which he watched from the corner of his eye, opened, and Madame de Laussan appeared, leaning upon the arm of Sirène; it seemed to Allard that she leaned heavily. A middle-aged man accompanied her, bareheaded, to the carriage; he leaned in after her to place on the seat beside her an oblong packet. Sirène entered the carriage, the door closed, and the horses moved away. The man stood on his door-step until the carriage turned the corner, then passed up the steps of the house, a tall brick building whose quaint iron-railed balconies hung over the street. Allard's eyes came back to the opposite door; he gave an involuntary start of surprise. The man entering leisurely was Théophile Bandrot, the well-known money-lender. Why, thought Allard, why should Madame de Laussan, whose affairs were in the hands of so sound and astute a lawyer as Alcide Paturin, be visiting the money-lender? and at his own house, as if upon some business demanding a secrecy

his office could not guarantee? Why should Madame de Laussan, at her advanced age, be out on such an errand? Bandrot was honest enough, doubtless, but, like his kind in general, unquestionably sharp. After all, Madame de Laussan might reasonably wish to drop some of her own money into the fire,—a foolishly expensive gift to Noémie, or a loan to that gay spendthrift, Félix Monplaisir,—without having to enter into explanations with old Paturin!

On his way back to Canal Street, he was rewarded for his promenade — and chagrined — by an all too brief glimpse of Hope in visible form. She was in an open landau with some people whom he did not know. She gave him a pretty bow in passing.

A little later, the hôtel de Laussan, which for the time being ceased to interest him, came into view. A young man, whom he vaguely remembered as having seen somewhere, was entering the street door. Allard rather envied the ease with which the stranger passed over the threshold and stepped along the corridor.

The stranger was Cortland; and this was Saturday, three o'clock.

VII

AT PETITPAIN'S

PETITPAIN stood somewhat apart, hunched against one of the enormous heaps of dusty French prints, sheet music, newspapers bound and unbound, school atlases, and the like, which cluttered the floor of his shop. He regarded with gloomy and jealous eyes the two customers who had pounced upon a vellum copy of Theocritus, dragging it with profane hands from its shelf, and were turning its yellowed pages, their heads close together. The old bookseller's shoulders worked convulsively, and from time to time he extended a bony hand as if to possess himself by violence of the book.

It is a fact well known to the French Quarter that Petitpain will sell you a (second-hand) copy of "Le Maître des Forges," or of "L'Assommoir," or even of the "Legendes des Siècles;" he will exchange with amiable alacrity old schoolbooks and maps for other old schoolbooks and maps. Petitpain's second-hand bookshop, at the begin-

ning of the school year, may be said, indeed, to rival in feverish activity the Cotton Exchange, or the Sugar Market! Such crowding in and elbowing about of the blue-clad pupils of the Sacré Cœur and the gray-clad students of the Jesuits; such shrill altercations between the orphans and half-orphans of the Holy Family and the small swashbucklers of the Parochial School; such squabbling between L'École St. Jean and L'Académie Privée of Madame Vve Rivoire; such battles royal over *mappes-de-monde*; such sudden and unaccountable relapses into decorum and *camaraderie*, followed by such clamors of appeal to Monsieur Petitpain, hard-bestead where he stands under volleys of supplicating voices, and even battering-rams of curly little heads! It might well be imagined that the bookseller, scowling yonder at his two customers, would at such times breathe enough fire and slaughter to burn up his own shop and decimate the schools of the *Vieux Carré*. Not a bit of it! Petitpain, presiding over the destinies of chattering grade-climbers, is as nearly benignant as a dried-up bag of bachelor-bones can be. *Mais, c'est un ange, ce cher Monsieur Petitpain!*

Petitpain confronting the invader who has had the temerity to offer to buy one of his real books, ah, *c'est autre chose, ça*. God knows what he is keeping them for, those myriads of volumes of all sorts and conditions of paper and parchment, black-letter and illumination, tumbled promiscuously about untidy nooks, and piled upon unreachable shelves. Collectors say that the lot would fetch a tidy sum,—enough to “keep” Petitpain for the rest of his days; or rather it should be stated that collectors have in times past said this; nowadays these sharp-nosed individuals have no chance at Petitpain’s treasures; Petitpain has eyes in the back of his head for a collector; his shutters have been known to stay up for three days upon the mere casual “good-morning” (with a rapier-like dart of the connoisseur-eye about the shop) of a collector. It is believed in Frenchtown that Petitpain will rather starve than sell a fraction of one of those never-opened books, which he loves as if they were the children he has never had.

The old man continued to glare offensively at Miss Carrington and Captain Allard, who remained utterly oblivious of his presence even; they were

perhaps equally unmindful of the discolored leaves they turned. The day without was lowering; the wide, low-ceilinged shop was laid in gray shadows, deepening with the waning afternoon. The young couple, over against the dark old man, lean and bent, and surrounded by musty pyramids of books and mountains of unsorted rubbish, were like chance visitants from some distant, radiant world. They looked at each other across the fat little Theocritus.

"Theocritus," remarked Allard, finally aware of Petitpain's existence. "I will buy the jolly little beggar of a book, Noé—Miss Carrington, because—" He left the sentence unfinished, but his eyes said plainly, "because I found you by chance in this heavenly shop."

"How much, monsieur?" he asked, turning to the proprietor.

"That? That is not worth the consideration of a gentleman like you, Monsieur le Capitaine."

Petitpain strove to hide his anxiety, remembering the days when le petit Allard never failed to carry off, under anybody's nose, what he wanted out of that shop! He took the book out of

Allard's hand, and thrust it into his own coat pocket. "Monsieur Maxime and Mademoiselle Carr-rreeng-ton will prefer, I am sure,—" his eyes roved vaguely about,—"this. But, certainly," — he darted upon a large, much-soiled copy of Buffon's "Natural History," and held it out almost supplicatingly.

"Not at all," remonstrated Allard, "I—mademoiselle prefers Theocritus."

"Theocritus is not for sale, monsieur," snorted Petitpain. He retired to the rear of the shop, whence he kept a wary eye upon le petit Allard, who was capable, oh, but of any villainy, *mon Dieu!*

Allard had already forgotten Theocritus. "I can hardly believe my own good luck," he was saying for the third or fourth time; "I have fairly haunted Royal Street from opera night to opera night, in the hope of seeing you. Last night you were not in your box, and I, blockhead that I was, had stayed away from the Heron dance, and, behold, you were at the Heron dance. But now, when I had almost given up ever seeing you again, I find you—"

"In Royal Street," smiled Noémie.

“Blessed Royal Street!”

“Oh, Maxime!” cried Noémie suddenly, “why did you go to West Point? Why did you enter that United States Army?”

“Why?” Allard’s head went up proudly. “Because I wished to serve my country. For, look you, Noémie, we are all one country now. My father fought for the Confederacy; so did yours. They served their country; why should I not serve my country and theirs?”

“How brave you are!” cried Noémie, brightening. “Also, I think you are right. But why should I say it! My opinion means nothing to you. You do not come—”

“Noémie!” Allard’s reproachful tone was tempered by rapture. “Don’t you see? You know that when my father allowed me to enter West Point, l’oncle Grandchamps was outraged; he said that my father had disgraced his record as a Confederate soldier; my father said that Major Grandchamps was a coward and a *polisson*,” — Allard laughed a little ruefully. “The two old fellows, who had slept under the same blanket, and fought side by side all through our Civil War, were ready to cut one another’s throats.

They are at it yet, bless 'em! Major Grandchamps says that the doors of the *famille Grandchamps*, far and near, are closed to the *famille Allard*, far and near. There we are. I find it all absurd myself, but I stand by the *famille Allard*. Besides," he sighed, "I am sure my uniform would make me hateful to the eyes of Madame de Laussan — dear *tante Laure*. But," he brightened, "the *Grandchamps-Allard* feud does not keep me from being friends, and fast friends, with *Jeanne Berthet*, and *Félix Monplaisir*, and the others; it need not keep me from lov — from liking you, need it? Anyway, I spend much of the time which belongs of right to my Uncle Sam," — *Noémie* looked mystified, — "the United States Government, I mean, hanging around in the hope of seeing you."

"Tom Masters is going up to his uncle's plantation next week," *Noémie* remarked, with apparent irrelevancy.

"Yes?" said *Allard*, taken aback and a little chilled by the abrupt change in the conversation.

Noémie, whose eyes were fixed on a stunted fig tree in *Petitpain's* courtyard, continued, "I

am having a sugarhouse party at Lady's Rule next week—”

“Ah!” breathed Allard.

“Jeanne is going, and Frances Heron, and Félix Monplaisir, and perhaps Mr. Strang. Madame Berthet, my cousin, will chaperone the party. Mr. Cortland also goes.”

“Cortland!” echoed Allard. “Why?”

“Why?” said Noémie gayly. “Why? Is not Mr. Cortland handsome? Is he not fascinating? Is he not — The truth is, Maxime, though Mr. Cortland is all this, I should not myself have thought of including him. But my grandmother, who has been very feeble, really ill, indeed, this past fortnight, has asked him. She has requested me to be ‘nice’ to him” — she dropped into English for the word. “Dear me, I must be going; or Sirène will be haunting Royal Street — like some one else.” She smiled bewitchingly. “You may walk with me as far as the Cathedral. I am making a novena.”

“For — ?”

“For the softening of l'oncle Grandchamps' heart.”

Petitpain came to the door and peered after

them as they walked away. He had taken the fat little book from his pocket, and was caressing it with a lean palm.

“But, he is a madman, *le petit Allard*,” he muttered; “*Theocritus!*”

VIII

AT LADY'S RULE

WHO wishes to tour the sugarhouse this morning?" demanded Noémie Carrington, from the doorway of the music room at Lady's Rule. She stood on the threshold, a-tip-toe, like a bird poised for flight.

"I do," cried Frances Heron, springing to her feet, her thimble, scissors, and embroidery frame dropping with a clatter to the bare floor.

"I do," echoed Jeanne Berthet, swinging slowly around on the piano stool.

Monplaisir nodded without raising his eyes from his newspaper.

Donald Strang, touching the strings of his guitar, finished the bit of song on his lip :—

*La vie est brève :
Un peu d'espoir,
Un peu de rêve,
Et puis — bonsoir.*

His eyes twinkled ; "Lead on, mesdemoiselles ; where the roses go, there follows the bee."

Cortland lounged forward ; he contrived without saying a word to convey the impression that the "tour" had been planned between himself and the young chatelaine of Lady's Rule ; he placed himself beside her with an air of comradeship as they all came out upon the wide, white-pillared gallery of the plantation house.

The smell of boiling sugar floated out, warm and sweet, from the sugarhouse beyond the intervening grounds.

"How it is delicious, that smell !" said Jeanne, her little nose sniffing the air.

The crispness of a mid-December forenoon was fast yielding to the warmth of the climbing sun ; but dewdrops still glistened, diamond-wise, upon the unshorn grass-blades on the lawn which sloped gently down to the reedy edge of Bayou Noir ; they ran in glistening rivulets from the broad-fringed banana leaves shading the Long Walk with the lily-pool at the farther end. From the sugarhouse, and from the canefields stretching out to the horizon, there came the subdued echoes of pounding machinery, and the steady *whoof! whoof!* of the smoke leaping in black jets from the huge chimneys ; and the min-

gled clatter of harness and whip-snap, the creak of high-wheeled cane wagons, the shouts of overseers, and the far-away rhythmic chorus of the cane-cutters.

Donald Strang's eyes brooded over the scene ; he made a tentative step toward his easel, set up on a corner of the gallery with a virgin canvas upon it ; but he thought better of it. "*Un peu de rêve*," he chanted under his breath, following Noémie.

In the rose-garden toward the rear of the house Uncle Mink was singing monotonously to the thump of his spade : —

*I met a 'possum in de road ;
He 'umble 'peared to be ;
He scrape' his foot an' bow' his haid,
An' gin de road to me.*

As Noémie and her guests descended the steps, Madame Berthet came around the corner of the gallery, garden shears in hand. "Noémie, my child," she drawled, "you really must speak to Uncle Mink. He has been seeing double in the Quarters. Zette is so terrified that she has left her ironing and is hiding under the cabin. The housekeeper is furious. I am furious myself."

“ You certainly look it, poor dear,” laughed Noémie, stooping to drop a kiss on Madame’s bared head as she passed. “ Don’t worry, *marraine*. Run along to your *pot pourri*. I will attend to Uncle Mink.” She flitted away.

The singing ceased abruptly ; it was followed, judging from echoed tones and an occasional outdrifted word, by an argument in which the old man was plainly worsted. His mistress presently reappeared, gayly caroling the forbidden ditty :—

*I met a 'possum in de road,
He 'umble 'peared to be.*

“ Beg pardon, Miss Carrington,” called a voice from behind the high cherokee rose-hedge, as they approached the division gate. “ Is that sarcastic allusion meant for me ? or, by chance, for the arrogant Allard, U. S. A. ? ”

Two horsemen, who had dismounted and tossed their bridle-reins to a grinning pair of pickaninnies, appeared in the gateway.

“ You arrive apropos ! ” Miss Carrington nodded a neighborly greeting to Masters and lifted surprised eyes at Allard. “ When did you come ? ” she asked the latter ingenuously, “ and how delightful for us that you should ‘ happen up ’ to

Godiva Plantation, as old Mr. Masters would say, while we are at Lady's Rule; or *are* you at Godiva?"

Allard explained elaborately that government service had brought him for twenty-four hours into the neighborhood. "Tom's uncle was kind enough to take me in," he concluded, "although the old gentleman disapproves of my uniform."

"He, too!" commented Strang. "Really, Maxime, my friend, it begins to look as if you might yet be called out by a battalion of Confederate graybeards."

"The first right belongs, it appears — according to the code — to the colonel, my father, as head of the house," laughed Allard. "He and Major Grandchamps have been perilously near an encounter over the matter *Allard fils* more than once these several years. By Jove, I honestly believe those gray old boys are itching to stick one another with the *colichemardes* of *dans le temps*." His mirth held the under-thought of a sigh. The presence of Cortland at Lady's Rule, on a footing so familiar, disturbed him by its contrast to his own momentary, half-surreptitious

advent there. He was too straightforward to deny even to himself his awakening jealousy of Cortland.

“Why is this plantation called Lady’s Rule?” asked Miss Heron, as they all moved on.

“Why? It used to be Rose-Marie Plantation,” replied Masters, “or was it Blanche? Something, anyway, which suggested the dove-eyed Lady who bides at home and makes orange-flower conserve, while her Lord goes down to that wicked New Orleans to sell his crop.”

“How the *idée américaine* is different! as Mademoiselle Berthet would put it,” remarked Strang. “Mr. Richard Carrington — doubtless with prophetic eyes — foresaw that the present mistress of the plantation would be a — in short, a termagant. Therefore he changed its name to one more in keeping with her character. He called it Lady’s Rule.”

The mistress of Lady’s Rule made a face at him over her shoulder.

“Jeanne,” said Allard, “let me see the color of your eyes. Ah, dove-colored! I thought so. Masters would like to inquire whether you are — also — an adept at orange conserve.”

“For myself,” cried Donald, “I prefer the style termagant — with a plantation, of course.” He touched the guitar strings as he spoke, and trolled on : —

*Dat 'umble 'possum bow' his haid
An' made a cunjer-sign.*

*“I kin lay low an' wait,” he say,
“Ontwel de yearth is mine.”*

“Me, I find that 'possum a most intelligent beast,” mused Jeanne aloud ; “he has the knowledge to lie low and wait. That is what you call a lesson, *hein?*”

Allard felt suddenly light of heart. He stole a glance at the speaker. But her eyes were fixed upon Cortland.

Cortland, on the appearance of the visitors from Godiva, had withdrawn into the black-browed silence which he instinctively felt to be his stronghold, and which, he had long ago learned, gave him a mysterious charm in the eyes of women. Nevertheless he raged inwardly at his inability to add his part to the light chaff floating airily about him.

“Mr. Masters,” said Noémie, when they had crossed the threshold of the vast sugarhouse,

“you are fresh from centrifugals and ‘takes’; my guests are thirsting for information. Please see that they —”

“Enter with the cane, and come out with the commodity? I will,” smiled Masters. He led the way in company with the manager of Lady’s Rule, who had come forward to meet them.

“As a mere woman,” observed Noémie, “I disapprove of science in sugar-making, and yearn backward for the open kettle and *cuite*. As a planter, I am of course ready, after the fashion of my fellow planters, to spend everything I make each year on experimental and expensive machinery for the next (possible) crop.”

The manager, a careworn man of middle age, smiled understandingly at his employer.

“Here,” explained Masters, mainly for the benefit of Miss Heron and Cortland, who had never seen the process, “is the beginning.” They had reentered the long, open shed flanked by bulwarks of high-wheeled cane-wagons. The inclined platform into which the shining stalks of purple and yellow cane were flung fresh from the fields mounted endlessly toward the enormous crushers

on the second floor of the sugarhouse. Thence, past rushing rivers of grass-green cane juice, along monstrous vats where the boiling juice foamed and seethed beneath overlying clouds of white vapor, around towering centrifugals filled with whirling masses of chemically-changing ooze, Masters brought the group at length to the shafts whose mouths were spitting sugar—warm, white, moist—into the barrels on the ground-floor far below. He turned to put a question to a grimy workman. Allard leaped past him with white face and staring eyes.

The plaited skirt of Noémie Carrington's light woolen gown, caught, as if by an invisible hand, had fluttered out, and curled itself about a flying band which whirled from one gigantic wheel to another. The girl's slight form, drawn after it, was jerked violently upward; her long hair, loosed from its fastenings, whipped like flames about her face and neck, then shot out as if magnetized. Quicker than thought, Allard's arms were about her; he threw himself backward with a force which tore the skirt from its belt and ripped it with a snap from top to hem. The pale-gray folds, among which glistened a few hairs like

threads of gold, spun along the belting, and disappeared, a blackened wad, among the spokes of the flying wheels.

The slight figure lay inert for a moment on Allard's breast, the disheveled head drooped to his shoulder.

“Your pretty gown, Noémie,” cried Jeanne, hysterically, after an awed silence. The trivial remark restored speech to the others.

“Lady's Rule owes me a new one!” declared Noémie, with forced gayety. She shuddered, averting her eyes from the huge band. “I am not fit to be a sugar-planter if I cannot keep out of mischief in my own sugarhouse.” She looked down at the disarray of her attire, and a flush of embarrassment rose to her pallid cheek. “I am not even a presentable chatelaine.”

At the door of the music room she swayed unexpectedly, and would have fallen. Allard again caught her in his strong arms, and carried her to a couch.

Cortland, who had sprung forward too late, saw the look in her beautiful eyes lifted to Allard's face. He felt a curious sensation; a shock had passed through him, leaving him inwardly

stunned. He had discovered, for the first time in his life, that to greed might be added another passion, perhaps even more overpowering. He found himself in love with Noémie Carrington.

IX

SEEING DOUBLE

THE same night the house-party, augmented by the two bachelors from Godiva Plantation, was assembled again in the music room at Lady's Rule. Mademoiselle Berthet was, as usual, at the piano ; Donald Strang, bending over her, hummed in an undertone an accompaniment to the chords which grew under her skilled fingers. Masters, playing at backgammon with Madame Berthet, gloomed from time to time with open envy toward the artist ; his partner, using her plump fingers as an adding machine, smiled slyly, affecting not to notice. The young hostess, still a little pale from the adventure of the morning, made the centre of a small group, from which Miss Heron and Monplaisir presently drifted away.

Allard was unaccountably silent. "It must be confessed," thought Noémie, "that silence is not so becoming to Maxime as it is to Mr. Cortland ; decidedly it is not his *métier*. Cortland is as

impassive and unconscious in his dumbness as an Oriental. Maxime in his is fidgety and self-conscious ; I wonder what is the matter with him."

She glanced furtively from one to the other seated on either hand.

Her reflections were disturbed by the entrance of Big Hannah, a sort of under-housekeeper, and the martinet of the negro quarters. She was one of the old Carrington slaves, brought out from Virginia by Richard Carrington when he purchased and stocked the war-dismantled plantation on Bayou Noir, which he rechristened Lady's Rule. She was also the grandmother of Little Hannah, Uncle Mink's latest "bride."

Big Hannah's high turban was a-quiver with indignation ; her dark, old face wore a scowl seldom seen outside of the world over which she presided in unquestionable authority. "Miss No-mee, honey !" She addressed her young mistress, before whom she stood in respectful attitude, with the affectionate familiarity of the hereditary family servant. "You better sen' down to de Quarters for ole Mink. He settin' in a cheer in Tildy's cabin wi' Li'l Hannah 'longside him, fair turrifyin' dem fool niggers out'n deir senses."

“ You see, Noémie, *mon enfant*,” said Madame Berthet, looking up from the backgammon board, “ if you *will* treat Uncle Mink like a spoiled child ! He really ought to be — ”

“ Torn limb from limb, eh, Madame Berthet ? ” concluded Strang.

“ Why, Donald ! ” cried the literal little person ; “ I would not countenance anything so cruel ! ”

“ Send Uncle Mink to me, Aunt Hannah. At once,” directed Noémie. “ I really don’t know how to punish Uncle Mink,” she sighed, “ unless I take away his fiddle — which would break his dear old heart.”

“ What has the old devil been doing ? ” asked Masters.

“ He has been ‘ seeing double,’ ” laughed Noémie, “ whatever that is.”

“ *Mon Dieu !* ” murmured Monplaisir, “ if men are to be punished for seeing double, what will become of the purveyors of — champagne ! ”

“ If a man is to be punished for seeing double,” repeated Masters dreamily, “ I fear Donald’s guitar will be hung up with Uncle Mink’s fiddle.”

“ What *is* seeing double ? ” queried Frances Heron.

“To tell the truth, I hardly know,” returned Noémie, “although I have known of Uncle Mink’s gift ever since I could remember. I fancy it is something like second sight, or throwing the wanga. However it may be, the spell, as he calls it, or the ‘sperret,’ comes upon him at irregular intervals. It never fails to throw the Quarters here, or the kitchen in town, into a panic. I sometimes suspect that the old fellow is after this result.”

“How exciting!” cried Frances. “I feel myself shivering on the edge of a voodoo rite. Do let us see the prophet perform.”

Jeanne shrieked. “But no! He will have snakes in his basket. They call themselves brothers to snakes. I know! My *bonne* used to make *gri-gri*!”

A shuffling footstep sounded on the rear gallery; a portière was drawn aside, and Big Hannah reappeared, ushering in the culprit. He removed a shapeless hat as he approached, ducked his head, and scraped a conciliatory foot, rolling his eyes until only the whites were visible beneath his shaggy brows. “Evenin’, Miss No-mee,” he said unctuously; “ladies an’ gentermen, evenin’.

Lawd! li'l miss," — to his young mistress, — "you cert'n'y is fitten to lead de squire o' cherry-bins, in dat white dress!"

"Uncle Mink," interrupted Noémie severely, "what did I tell you this morning in the rose-garden?"

"In de rose-gyarden? I disremember edzackly, Miss No-mee. But I knows, in gin'r'l, dat I'ze a po' sinner. Yassum. 'N I was down yander in Tildy's cabin — Tildy 's my secon' ma-in-law — erwhile ago, rastlin' in pra'r fer strenk to get a holt of ole black Satan, when Big Hannah — she's my gran'ma-in-law, — she come 'sturbin' my pra'r — "

"Uncle Mink," threatened Noémie again, "what did I tell you this morning in the rose-garden?"

"In de rose-gyarden? Truf is, honey, hit make a man fergetful to git married — specially fer de sixt' time."

"Uncle Mi— "

"Yassum. Yas'm," stammered the old man piteously, "you done t-tole me d-d-dat you gwine ter take erway my f-f-fiddle ef I — "

"Never mind, Uncle Mink," interposed Allard,

“Miss Carrington will let you off this once ; *this once*, you understand, you black rascal.”

“Yas, Marse Max, thanky, Marse Max,” — he grinned expansively, and began backing away, bobbing his old head and casting sidewise triumphant glances at Big Hannah.

“Hold on, you old sinner !” ordered Masters ; “Miss Noémie will let you off — this once — if you will show these young ladies how you can throw wanga.”

“Me ! Lawd, Marse Don, I ain’t never tho’d wanga sence I jined de chu’ch.”

“Well, whatever it is you do. See double ? How do you see double ?”

“Hit’s dess disher way, Marse Don. I dess shets my eyes, an’ a pusson stan’s befo’ me. Den *ef* I sees double, I sees ano’er pusson standin’, behine dat pusson lak a shadder. Seein’ double, dat means trouble,” he concluded, with a wag of his head. “I kin see thripple, too,” he added darkly.

“Oh !” cried Frances, springing from her seat, “shut your eyes this minute, and see if I have a shadow behind me.”

The old man looked doubtfully at his mistress. She nodded, smiling.

The seer folded his arms, the knotted hands clenched ; his sharp, old eyes retired into an ambush of grizzled brows ; his thick lips pushed outward and fell apart, revealing red, well-nigh toothless gums.

“No wonder the Quarters were in a commotion,” whispered Jeanne, drawing closer to the gathered circle.

Expectant silence, stirred only by the distant *whoof! whoof!* from the sugarhouse chimney, like the heartbeat of some giant-monster, filled the room. “What you see, Mink?” demanded Hannah. With the awe and hush of her voice there mingled a suppressed note of pride, almost of triumph. It was as if, though disapproving of the old man’s use of his gift, she exulted in his power. “What you see, Mink?”

“I don’t see nuttin’,” was the response, received with a sigh, half of relief, half of disappointment. One after another stepped in front of the thrower of the wanga ; each time Big Hannah’s question brought the same answer, “I don’t see nuttin’ ; my mine an’ my innard eyes is a vacance.”

Came the turn of Noémie. “What you see, Mink?”

“I sees double! Gawd a’mighty, I sees double!
An’ de shadder is *vigrous* black!”

Noémie fell back, startled in spite of herself, uttering a sharp cry.

Mink opened his eyes, his old frame shook, his raised hands beat the air. “Gawd! Hit’s li’l miss, hit’s li’l miss!” he wailed. “Honey-chile, don’t you b’leeve ole Mink. He ain’t nuttin’ but a liar! Gawd!”

“Why, Uncle Mink,” cried Noémie soothingly; “I am not afraid of shadows! Have n’t I got you to stand between me and any harm? Now you just shut your eyes once more.”

Strang and Masters presented themselves with grimaces of pretended fright. “I don’t see nuttin’.” The old man’s voice had grown sullen.

“I sees double,” he announced briefly, when Allard stood before him. He would say no more.

Lastly, Cortland stepped forward; a contemptuous smile curled his lip as he faced the seer.

“What you see, Mink?”

“I sees thripple,” declared Mink solemnly; “I sees thripple. Fo’ de Lawd, I does.”

“What does that mean?” demanded Frances curiously.

“ Thripple (treble), dat mean de debble,” returned the old man, with his eyes still closed. At the laugh which followed this announcement, his eyes opened wide.

“ You see treble, do you ? ” laughed Cortland ; an angry sneer lurked behind the laugh.

“ Yas, sir, I sees thripple,” said Mink doggedly.

“ You may go, Uncle Mink,” interposed his young mistress hastily. “ Sit in your cabin door while you play to-night,” she added, laying an affectionate hand on his arm, “ so that we may hear you.”

“ Yas’m, yas’m, li’l miss,” he grinned, delighted. “ I gwine to tech up ‘ Billy in de low groun’’ er ‘ Sugar in de gode.’ Marse Dick useter shake his foot to dem chunes. Yas’m.” He backed out, his pockets clinking with the loose silver which had rained into his rusty palm. Big Hannah followed, scowling again, under her turban.

“ Me, I prefer serpents, vipers ! ” shivered Jeanne. “ In your place, Noémie, I should be afraid to go to sleep with that *vigrous* shadow lurking about ! ”

“Nonsense!” cried Noémie. “The shadow, look you, Jeanne, is behind me. That typifies—”

“Light ahead,” finished Allard. “Besides, I back my shadow against yours in mortal combat. I prophesy that they will cut each other’s throats.”

“Bravo!” shouted Strang. “And yours, Cortland? What part will they play in Miss Carrington’s life? For you must have two, you know.”

But Cortland had again withdrawn into his stronghold. His silence, as usual, was somehow more impressive than the spoken words of the others.

A little later Captain Allard and Miss Carrington strolled side by side down the banana-shaded Long Walk to the lily-pool. A full moon rode, glorious, the sky overhead, through myriads of stars dimmed by her light. The flickering shadows of the incessantly quivering banana leaves darted from fold to fold of Noémie’s white gown; their over-bending fringes dropped dew upon her hair. The sugarhouse, with windows red-litten, like Poe’s Haunted Palace, poured out upon the night air its multitudinous noises, above which, full-throated, arose from the gang

about the cane-carrier a chorus, strange, rhapsodic :—

Plant da' tree, Aber-ham !
Plant da' tree, Joshu-way !
Zoom-ba-loom-ba !
Nail da' cross, Pilate !
Nail da' cross, Cai'phus !
Zoom-ba-loom-ba !
Tone da' bell, Ma-ry !
Tone da' bell, Mar-thy !
Zoom-ba-loom-ba !
Zoom !

Like a thin, faint undertone, the wailing of Mink's fiddle trailed up from the Quarters.

“Maxime,” the girl's voice trembled, breaking an inexplicable silence, “I have not said anything to you about this morning because—”

“Don't,” Allard interrupted, “don't say anything. I do not wish to remember—this morning. I am trying to forget how near you were to—” he shuddered involuntarily. “Besides,” he continued before she could speak, “there is so much that I wish to say. It is my time to talk now. I am going back to the city to-morrow—”

She uttered an exclamation; he hurried on:

“—and I have so few opportunities of seeing you—like this. Do you know, Noémie, that it

was here, at Lady's Rule — though it had not yet become Lady's Rule — at a ball, that my father asked my mother to marry him? Perhaps it was in this very Long Walk that — ”

There was such meaning in his voice, such significance in his abrupt pause, that Noémie's face flamed scarlet.

“Is that true?” she stammered. “How *dear!*!” she added more naturally. “Come, captain, let us go in. I am neglecting my duties shamefully.”

“Noémie!” He put out a detaining hand. “Noémie!” His voice had become very grave. He faced her, the lily-pool, in its curb of marble like a silver mirror under the moon, at their feet. “You know already that I love you. You have known it since we were boy and girl together playing at *grand cordonnier* in the courtyard yonder in town, or sailing paper ships across this very pool. I have never told you in so many words how much I love you. Need I now? Neither have I before told you in so many words that I want you to be my wife — ”

“Don't, Max,” she prayed, in a low tone and with averted face.

“Do you mean — ?” he began.

“ You are forgetting the famous feud, Captain Allard,” she cried, with forced gayety.

“ Do you mean — ?” he repeated sternly.

“ Oh, Max ! ” she pleaded again ; “ you must not. I — I — ”

He caught her hands in his and compelled her to look at him. “ Is there any one else ? ” he demanded.

“ I — I do — not know,” she breathed.

“ You knew, or I thought you did, less than a week ago, when I thought I had found heaven in a dingy bookshop in Royal Street.” His tone was tinged with bitterness. He had dropped her hands. “ It is Cortland,” he said quietly, after a pause. “ I do not believe he is worthy of you, Noémie. But then, no man is — I least of all. So you are to be married ? When ? ”

She had made a movement as if to speak in answer to his first sentence. Now she threw up her head proudly. “ You have no right to ask such a question, Captain Allard. But I tell you, because it is my pleasure to do so, that Mr. Cortland has not asked me to marry him.”

Allard drew a long breath. “ Then I give you warning,” he said, “ that I, Maxime Allard,

shall ask you again to marry me — and again — and again, until you tell me that you are promised to Cortland, or another. So long as you are free, Noémie."

They stood a moment in silence, a flushed and angry girl and a cool and determined man. Then the girl, within whose heart Allard's open declaration had set into motion a whirl of hitherto unsuspected emotions, — affirmations, denials, questionings, memories, dreams, — softened suddenly. She put out her hand. "I cannot quarrel with my oldest friend and comrade, can I? You have been most impertinent, Captain Allard. L'oncle Grandchamps would set that down to your uniform! But, Max! I seem to *see* our little long-ago selves setting our wee-bit ships afloat in this old pond, and Myself tumbling in head-foremost, and Yourself jumping in to pull me out."

"And Yourself getting scolded for spoiling your frock, and Myself well flogged for leading your Ladyship into mischief," he chuckled.

"I was n't worth it!" she challenged gayly, the danger overpast. In truth, she longed, woman-like, to recall the danger.

“Maybe not,” he returned enigmatically. They went slowly up the Long Walk to the house.

“Remember! again—and again—and again,” he said, as they mounted the steps; “wait one moment. Do you hear what Uncle Mink is picking out of his fiddle?

*“‘I kin lay low an’ wait,’ he say,
‘Ontwel de yearth is mine.’”*

He stood looking after her as she flitted down the hall.

Cortland, on the gallery, leaning against a white, fluted column, also looked after her. Then his eyes swept the rich expanse of field and park, orchards, gardens, sugarhouse, and out-buildings, and came back to the Great House itself. The pale-blue orbs, between their narrowed lids, had taken on the glitter which meant greed; but the other something was also present, accentuating the fire-like sparks in the small pupils, and deepening the sensual lines in the unguarded face.

Strang touched Allard on the shoulder with a light forefinger; they stood, themselves unseen, in the shadow of upreaching rose-vines. “If Mademoiselle Berthet prefers vipers,” whispered

Donald, "here might be one to her liking! Look at him! What in the devil's name is Madame de Laussan thinking of! The smooth scoundrel makes me ill!"

X

A POSTPONEMENT

SIRÈNE, crouched at the foot of a pedestal which supported a bronze statue of Zenobia, followed the agitated movements of her mistress with great, yellow eyes whose anguish belied the impassivity of her face beneath the knotted tignon. The high-backed chair of Madame de Laussan, with the embroidered tabouret before it, was set near an open window; the inblown lace curtains made a soft, swishing sound on the bare floor. There was an illuminated Book of Hours upon the small table against the chair-arm; a filmy lace handkerchief, faintly perfumed with *vite et vert*, marked the page where the reader had left off. A tall crystal vase beside it held a single full-blown magnolia, whose golden heart, within the waxen petals, was ceaselessly a-quiver. Madame de Laussan paced the library with halting steps—for she had grown visibly feebler during these past few months—from one cabinet to

another, peering with unseeing eyes through the glass doors, touching here and there, with absent fingers, some well-remembered trifle. Her ears were strained toward the bell, unaccountably silent, on the distant street door. She pressed against her bosom, with one pale hand, a slim package; this she examined from time to time, even removing the bank-notes from their envelope to count them over again with feverish haste.

“ You are sure, Sirène, that to-day is the seventeenth?”

“ But yes, ’Tite Maîtresse, very sure.”

“ Of April, Sirène?”

“ But certainly, ’Tite Maîtresse. Courage, *mon ange*. The letter will be in your hands soon, soon.” The smile that lighted her sombre face brought an answering smile to the eyes regarding her from across the room.

“ Me,” continued Sirène, a savage sharpness thrusting itself like a dagger-point into her mellow voice, “ me, when we have paid him our clean money, which will become dirty as soon as he touches it, I will see to it that the Grand Zombi pays him too! But, yes! The bones of that assassin shall melt like wax, ’Tite Maîtresse. The

blood of his heart will go thin, thin, thin — like moonlight! For the bat will sit in his heart, the sucking bat! Wanga! Wanga!" She twisted her long, lithe arms above her head; red flames burned in her eyes. "Aie! Aie! I would have killed him long ago, the monster, if I had known where he keeps that letter."

Madame de Laussan still stood with one hand grasping the back of a chair, the other guarding the envelope; her eyes were fixed upon the mulattress, but the wild words fell upon unheeding ears.

"It is already past the hour, Sirène. He will not—" But stay, was not that a familiar step on the banquette below? Did it not pause at the street door? Ah! The insistent clang of the bell echoed along the *porte cochère*, and came noisily up the stair.

She greeted Cortland, when he entered, from her accustomed chair, returning his effusive salutation with grave politeness. At a motion of her hand, Sirène glided from the room. Cortland was himself too well versed in dissimulation not to know that the mulattress, of whose animosity he was well aware, had stationed herself within

earshot, behind some curtain-fold or heavy portière.

“Monsieur is a little later than the appointed moment,” began Madame de Laussan. “But”—she forced a smile—“a man who has so many social duties—”

“With your permission, I will seat myself,” interrupted Cortland deliberately, suiting the action to the word.

“Pardon my forgetfulness.” The slight irony in her tone was not lost upon her visitor, who, however, appeared unconscious of its intention. “Doubtless,” continued Madame de Laussan, “I have become rusty in manners, as you Americans would say, since my seclusion of these past months. While monsieur has had so abundant opportunity of acquiring—I should say of keeping in touch with—the graces of the *beau monde*. Monsieur is to be congratulated on his success in that world,” she added, with a quick urbanity awakened by a warning sigh which floated into the room from some screened recess.

“Madame de Laussan—” Cortland put aside brusquely both irony and compliment.

“I understand,” Madame de Laussan hastened tremulously to interpose; “monsieur is here for business. Thanks for the suggestion. Then let us proceed. Here, Monsieur Cortland,”—she drew the crisp notes one by one from the envelope and smoothed them out upon her knee. At sight of them the man’s eyelids narrowed until the greenish eyes glared as through a slit; his nostrils expanded, his fingers twitched; he moistened his lips with the point of his tongue. The insweeping breeze blew across the notes a fold of Madame de Laussan’s silk scarf, hiding them from view. Cortland braced himself in his chair, breathing heavily. Madame de Laussan, mistaking his movement for one of impatience, hurried on.

“Here, Monsieur Cortland, I have seven thousand five hundred dollars, the second and last payment on the debt which I — owe you.” She also breathed heavily in the effort to keep out of her voice the least suggestion of eagerness. “Monsieur will have the goodness to count the money, and, by way of receipt therefor, to place in my hands, according to agreement, a certain letter, which — ”

“Not so fast, madame, if you please.” He arose and pushed back his chair ; his eyes, wide enough now, were darting about, here, there, anywhere, in a supreme effort to keep away from the notes held out to him. “Put the money back in the envelope. We want to talk this matter over—first.” His tone had become so harshly imperious that she obeyed mechanically, lifting a white face to his the while. He strode back and forth the length of the room several times.

“I have, in fact, changed my mind,” he said at last, stopping again before her. “Don’t be a fool, woman !” He thrust his face into hers, his hot breath scorching her cheek. The shriek died, strangled, in her throat. “Do you, by chance, want to bring Mademoiselle Noémie de Laussan Carrington into our little *tête-à-tête* ? Or your kinsman, Major Grandchamps ? Both, I happen to know, are no further away than the billiard-room. Listen to me,” he urged in a calmer tone, though he still stood in a menacing attitude over her ; “I have changed my mind because I have another proposition to make. I’ll not beat about the bush, either, as your fine aristocrats would do. I love Noémie. Don’t trouble yourself to speak,

madame. I know well enough what you would say if you — dared. I love the girl. I have never in my life loved any woman, though I 've had enough, and more than enough, to do with women.” He laughed fatuously. A shiver passed through the bowed form before him. “Oh, yes, I know that in your eyes it is nothing less than sacrilege for a man like me — the son of the Yankee officer who looted your house ; a man who comes out of that *poor white trash* whom you and your class despise — yes, madame, and by God ! the time will come, when —”

He stopped, frowning and biting his lip ; the reference to his origin had escaped him unaware. “I know,” he went on with increasing boldness, “that you consider it a crime for me even to dream of Noémie”— a sudden tenderness softened the syllables of the name. “I know that if you dared you would call in your servants and have me beaten — as you and your sort used to beat your niggers — and kicked out into the street. But I have the whip-hand of you as long as I have a certain letter in my possession. For that reason, madame, I decline to receive the money — at present — which you hold in your

hand, and I call off the bargain for another six months. If, at the end of that time, I have not succeeded in winning Noémie for my wife — ”

“ Your *wife* ! Noémie, *your* wife ! never ! ” gasped Madame de Laussan, scorn and terror struggling for mastery in the cry.

“ And why not ! ” demanded Cortland sharply. As once before in the same room, and in the same presence, his soul had burst its sheath, and stood revealed in all its native brutality, the very voice had changed, and was become coarse and vulgar. “ And why not ! Is not a poor white, the son of a Yankee thief, good enough for a — ”

She recoiled from the unuttered word as if from a blow. “ *Sirène ! à moi !* ” she called chokingly. But Sirène, crossing the room with a bound, was already encircling the half-fainting form with her arms. “ *Assassin !* ” she hissed, her fiery eyes full upon him.

“ You keep out, or — ” he hissed in return ; then, mastering himself, “ come now, madame, ” he said in a conciliatory tone, “ you know I never meant that. I love the girl honestly. Honestly, ” — he repeated the word as if the sound of it on his own tongue gave him an unwonted sensation, —

“and I believe that Noémie loves me. Or if she don’t now, she will, by God !” His lower jaw protruded with a bulldog snap. “Now what I want of you is just this. You give me your word, as a Creole gentlewoman”—to save him, he could not forego this sneer—“that you will keep out of the game, you and your nigger, there.” Sirène spat at him openly. “For six months I will agree not to show the letter or speak of it to any one. Oh, I keep the letter, of course,” he interpolated, in answer to an unspoken ejaculation in both pairs of eyes, fixed, horrified, upon him. “I keep the letter because I don’t trust women, white, yellow, or black. If, at the end of six months, or let us say seven, which will make one year from the date of the first payment,—one year and a day, as Mademoiselle Carrington would say,—since I had the honor of offering to restore to the famille de Laussan the priceless document carried away, by mistake, by my father during the late unpleasantness,—he bowed with exaggerated politeness,—“if by that time Noémie Carrington is not my wife, or my—touch me, you yellow devil, and I ’ll strangle you !—I will return you the said document and receive the money accord-

ing to our original agreement. It is a good bargain for you, let me tell you ! You will have the use of your seven thousand five hundred in the meantime ; and you will have an opportunity of becoming better acquainted with Noémie's—husband.

“ Oh, call Major Grandchamps, madame, and give him the satisfaction of running me through, as he would say. Or send for the whipper-snapper of a Yankee captain, who is forbidden the house, but who meets your granddaughter in all sorts of out-of-the-way places — ”

“ Stop, monsieur,” said Madame de Laussan, with suddenly recovered composure ; “ I am ready, having no alternative, to submit to your proposition, namely : to allow you until the day specified to — ” an uncontrollable trembling shook her frame.

“ To make Noémie Mrs. Sidney Cortland,” suggested Cortland.

“ And to refrain from showing my — ”

“ Say it, madame. Don’t mince matters with one of the family ! Bless your heart, I don’t care. Your horror, you would say, of such a match.”

“ My horror of such an alliance. Thanks, monsieur, for the apt word. But not even to buy your silence will I submit to the shame of listening to slander, either of Mademoiselle Carrington or of the son of my old and honored friend, Colonel Allard.”

Cortland shrank in spite of himself, overawed by the dignity of the speaker. He hastened to adopt a more politic manner, drawing back like a spider when, prepared for a spring, it thinks better of it.

“ Demand to see the letter, *’Tite Maîtresse*,” breathed Sirène in the ear of her mistress, bending over her as if to loosen the lace about the quivering throat. Low as the words were, in the *nègre patois*, Cortland heard without fully understanding them ; he scented danger, and when, a few moments later, Madame de Laussan preferred the request, giving as her reason the desire to fix in her memory the date of the letter, he smiled astutely. “ I would be delighted to oblige you, madame,” he said ; “ but I have not the letter with me. In fact, I should not dream of carrying documents of such value upon my person. The letter, in a sealed envelope, be it understood, is

in the hands of my lawyer. In case of my death, or of any other mischance, it is to be handed, with instructions to open, to certain persons less scrupulous, I fear, than your humble servant.” He bent a malicious glance upon Sirène, who stared stolidly at the wall behind him.

“What guarantee have I, monsieur,” asked Madame de Laussan, after a dejected silence, “that at the end of the eight months the letter will be restored to me?”

“The word of a—” Cortland had begun with his impressive, acquired manner. He stopped and laughed outright.—“Of a poor white,” he concluded, in a tone become all at once sombre, “which of course you would not accept. However, it is, then, understood that I am to pay court to Mademoiselle de Laussan Carrington with your full approval and consent—a welcome guest in this house at all times, eh?”

He turned on his heel as he spoke, and swaggered out of the room. Sirène, holding aside the portière, kept her eyes on the floor as he approached; he did not pause, but at the instant of passing he tapped her shoulder with a blunt finger. “One word to Noémie against me, and I

kill—*kill!* not you, you d—d she-cat, but your mistress yonder—the old woman. You hear?”

Sirène spat at him again, smiling.

“Something—what the devil is it?” muttered Cortland, descending the steps, “something about that fool of a Madame de Laussan and her yellow nigger brings to the top everything I have kept under all these years. By God! what a fool I am to let myself go off like that. However, I’m safe enough. If I wanted to, I could strip from her every shred of property the old woman possesses, diamonds and Noémie thrown in, for that letter. I may do it yet!” His brow cleared. He stepped briskly along the banquette, reclad in picked-up gentility.

XI

IN THE COURTYARD

I DO not understand," observed Miss Carington thoughtfully, "how one can ever be quite sure."

"My dear girl," cried Strang, "one never *is* quite sure—so long as one can ask the question."

"I suppose there does come a moment?" pursued Noémie tentatively.

Donald considered this proposition for a short while in silence; then, with conviction: "Yes, there does come a moment. When the Mississippi River, for example, ceases to coquet first with the east bank, then with the left, and, surging and leaping, bursts in a mighty flood over the levees on both sides, sweeping away all bounds and—spreading destruction as it goes, far and wide."

"It is like that?" laughed the girl.

"It is like that, yes," Donald laughed back. But he regarded a little wistfully the flushed face, turned suddenly, so that it showed in clear-cut

profile against the white-starred greenery. They were pacing back and forth under a trellised rose-vine which overarched a foot-walk of the courtyard. The cream-white rose petals fell in a perfumed shower upon the cool flags ; a handful caught in her crinkly hair, rested like a coronet on her bared head. Strang bent toward her from his superior height ; his lips trembled with the words which had rushed to them so often before—to be forced back by the remembrance of his poverty, her extreme youth, his own unfitness, her wealth. “It cannot be Allard whom she—she loves,” he thought ; “for then she would know ! It must not be Cortland ; what if —”

“Oh, I forgot, Don,”—her tone had recovered its girlish lightness,—“I wanted to consult you about the lace for that rose-colored gown of mine. Shall I use my grandmother’s flounces, or —”

He drew back as if stung by the lash of a whip. “Yes,” he returned monotonously. He listened, throwing in a word here and there, getting hold of himself bit by bit,—“forcing the Mississippi back into its bed ” he said to himself whimsically.

"You are always such a help to me, Don," she concluded, the matter settled.

She stood on tiptoe to slip a half-opened rose-bud into his buttonhole; it snapped under her fingers. "A broken dream," he said, with a mock-tragic air. It would have taken the quick ear of love itself to detect the undercurrent in his voice as he chanted: —

*La vie est vaine :
Un peu d'espoir,
Un peu de haine,
Et puis, bonsoir.*

"Your accent and your sentiment are alike detestable," declared Noémie.

"I retire with my broken dream," he returned, stooping to pick up the bud snapped from its stem, and thrusting it into his breast pocket.

Left alone, Noémie continued to walk back and forth in the trellised way where Strang, with a pretext of a sketch under his arm, had found her. Her thoughts returned to the circle in which they had been wandering — helplessly, like people lost in a forest — for the past weeks, and particularly for the past hours. "It is beyond comprehension!" she argued within herself: "when *ma mère* urges me to show more consideration to

Mr. Cortland, then I hate Mr. Cortland almost as much as Sirène does—I wonder, by the way, why Sirène hates him so!—and when Félix Monplaisir hints darkly that Cortland is a boor and an impostor, I find myself angry with Félix and almost ready to—elope with Cortland, if he should ask me! When l'oncle Grandchamps falls into a fury over what he is pleased to call Maxime's perfidy,—as if it were a perfidy to serve one's country,—I can imagine *l'anneau d'alliance* on my finger. But when *Marraine* contrives that Maxime shall find me next to him at Mass, I detest—yes, I detest Maxime. Truly it is a mystery! When Maxime flaunts in the face of the world his jealousy of Cortland, I am irresistibly repelled from him in the direction of—Sidney.” She blushed as the name for the first time found itself upon her murmuring lips. “On the other hand, when Cortland presumes to criticise Maxime, I am furious. Oh!”

The sudden thought that leaped to her brain arrested her feet. She stood stock still, trying to remember. A word or two dropped by Cortland an hour earlier seemed suddenly to take on meaning unnoticed at the time. “You will join a party

I am making up to see the Fire Dance at — Park to-night, will you not?" he had asked.

" My grandmother — "

" Madame de Laussan has already given her consent; I have seen her," he interrupted, with his accustomed brusque imperiousness. " Madame Berthet will go, of course, and Mademoiselle Jeanne. Also — "

" I—I do not know," she interrupted in her turn; " I have half an engagement already."

" With the Herons? Yes, I know; but they have consented to come with us. Captain Allard will be there," he added, after a pause.

She had hesitated; an unusual eagerness in his voice putting her on guard. She had no mind to make, as yet, the inevitable decision between her two lovers.

" Captain Allard," — was the repetition charged with significance? — " will be there — on business of his own. He will doubtless be more surprised than pleased to meet Miss Carrington by the light of Pepita's flaming aureole."

She had considered this a rather petty fling at Allard's undisguised dislike of Cortland and probable irritation at seeing her in company with

his rival. But the words, recurring to her, carried a subtle innuendo. She shook her head impatiently. "It will not do, Mr. Cortland. Captain Allard is at present the pole positive. I am moving away from you, sir, at the rate of —"

XII

THE FIRE DANCE

THE stage of the open-air theatre represented a huge shell ; it stood out, when lighted, in rose-colored relief between the flanking wings, which seemed to recede into shadow. Now, the whole mass, outlined against a starless horizon, was dark and mysteriously silent. The spectators were almost as hushed under a heavily clouded sky ; the wind blowing in fitfully from Lake Pontchartrain was charged with the musky perfume of swamp-flowers. Noémie, her hands clasped about her knees, stared into the darkness ; her heart was beating strangely. Cortland, beside her, kept his eyes fixed upon her face, gleaming softly-white in the obscurity ; he seemed unexpectant, though a nervous twitching of his under lip hinted at inner excitement.

“ Aie ! ” sighed Jeanne Berthet, “ I find this ghos’ly. We do not even talk. My tong is voodooed. For what, then, do we wait ? Ah ” —

for a whispering sound had announced the lifting of the curtain. Unseen musicians began to play softly a sort of disembodied prelude that barely trembled into the air from stringed instruments alone. Something vague, undefined — a vaporous breath — passed across the deeper darkness of the shell; then, as if blown back, it wavered again into view, taking on a dim shape, and instantly vanished. The onlookers strained their eyes until the figure, if figure it was, reappeared, dawning slowly into the outlines of a woman, tall and slight, whose diaphanous draperies were tinged as with the pale opalescence of moonlight upon snow.

The shell was suddenly flooded with light.

The dancing of Pepita, the Cuban, as judged by any known standard, was not dancing at all. There was a series of slow, rhythmic movements, in which the white garments of the dancer, outblown by some unearthly wind, caught from some invisible sky flashes of exquisite color, subtle, elusive, evanescent. Her delicate body gleamed like mother-of-pearl through myriad folds of thinnest Oriental silk; her outspread arms opened fluttering wings of rose, amber, and violet.

The dreamy music quickened stealthily. Pepita swayed from side to side as if vaguely troubled, then, folding her pinions, stooped to the floor, the lights sinking with her, and rose enveloped in a blaze of sulphurous flame. The spectators burst into exclamations of awed delight as the slender figure whirled, a column of fire, across the velvety darkness. Tongues of dazzling flame, tipped with scarlet, played around her head, throwing into relief her thin, beautiful, foreign face ; her dark eyes gleamed like fixed stars through the shag of black hair which fell over her forehead.

Wildly, and more wildly still, as if in frantic effort to escape the consuming terror, the dancer writhed back and forth, beating her breast with impotent hands. Suddenly an angry sheet of fire from beneath her feet, mounting, scorched her into annihilation. She threw up her meagre arms, and sank, a bluish, palpitating mass, into nothingness.

There was a cry of horror from the audience ; a man rushed shrieking toward the stage ; a woman fainted. Even the initiated stood up, uncertain and tremulous. Noémie clutched Cort-

land's arm, suffering him unnoted to hold her for a moment to his breast.

But the devouring flame had released a Soul ! It was flying on wide, snow-white wings across the hushed void ; the backward-floating robes were lightly touched with a cool, green radiance. The hands, meekly folded upon the breast, and the small, bare feet were translucent, like the inner leaf of a resurrection lily.

The heavenly vision hovered for one moment before the incredulous, wondering throng, then faded, dissolving like a wraith of mist, under their gaze.

The lights flared up ; there was a second of dazed silence, followed by tumultuous clamor, — clapping of hands, stamping of feet, shouts, calls for *Pepita ! Pepita !*

The Cuban, still in her gauze robes, which trailed away from her, showing her bare feet, came out with halting, uncertain step, and stood in the heart of the glowing shell. Her small face was very white, very drawn, and pitifully young ! She seemed scarcely more than a child — a frightened child at that ! For her parted lips trembled, her eyes rolled wildly. People were asking each

other wonderingly how this spectre could have contrived, but now, to appear beautiful! Suddenly the sombre eyes fixed themselves upon some one just beyond the orchestra; a smile lighted the young face. "*Maxime! Maxime!*!" The shrill cry silenced the incipient applause. She stretched out emaciated arms. "*Maxime!*!" A thin stream of scarlet spurted from her lips; she sank once more, but this time gasping, to the floor.

The curtain was hastily dropped, but not before Noémie Carrington had seen Maxime Allard leap upon the stage and stoop to the huddled heap of silk and lace, which, a short half hour before, had been a circling, throbbing, ecstatic rainbow, an intense shining, a rhythmic dream.

"Good!" exulted Cortland within himself, hurrying Noémie out by a side gate, ostensibly to avoid the excited, jostling crowd. "I would not have thought the Dago hussy so clever an actress. Pardon, Miss Carrington," he added aloud, seizing her arm almost roughly and drawing her aside; "I believe we are in Captain Allard's way."

For Allard, carrying the slight form of the dancer in his arms, was striding toward a carriage

drawn up against the curb without the gate. Pepita's eyes were still closed; her waxen face lay like a wilting flower against Allard's breast. Unconscious, apparently, or reckless, of the many pairs of eyes regarding him in undisguised astonishment,—even of Noémie's look of scorn,—he stepped into the carriage, gave a curt order to the coachman, and was driven rapidly away.

“You—knew?” Noémie said in a low voice.

“Yes,” said Cortland readily; the man was too cunning to pretend reluctance. “I knew. Shall I tell you how I knew? The girl, who, by the way, is shamming illness for effect, is—”

“Tell me nothing,” she interrupted. “It is enough for me to have seen, with my own eyes, Captain Allard’s public devotion to a common dancer. He—he was nothing to me, nothing whatever, you understand. But I respected him. I—I thank you more than I can say, Mr.—”

“Sidney,” he breathed, bending toward her. “Say it—Noémie! Will you not?”

“Sidney,” she repeated mechanically. Her thoughts, it must be confessed, were otherwhere.

He could hardly restrain a savage, exultant shout; he took the hand she held out to him,

and drew it with masterful grasp within his arm, folding his own over it.

At the same moment Captain Allard bent above a bed in the Sanitarium, and, holding in his hand the ice-cold hand of a dying girl, was listening to the disconnected words which fell from her pale lips. A white-capped nurse hovered near, but the doctors, motioning to the officer that the final moment was approaching, had retired to the other end of the room. The dancer had been babbling delightedly, like a child, but now a glaze dulled the lustrous eyes, which still sought his face.

“Do you remember, Maxime,” she had queried, in the soft Spanish which he had learned, a soldier, in Cuba. “Do you remember the day you came to our cabin seeking water, and found my mother half-dying beside my dead father? and myself, *pobrecita* that I was, at their feet, burned up with fever, and starving? How good you were to us, Maxime, *mi hermano*. *Madre de Diós!* how good you were! After you went away — ”

After he went away, the mother had died, the thirteen-year-old girl had been picked up by a wandering impresario; and during the past two

years she had been Pepita, the Cuban Fire Dancer. "I made up that *scena* myself," she explained, with childish pride, to her listener.

She had desired to see the *amigo Americano*, the *hermano* Maxime. Truly she had desired to see him when she had found herself in his city. But one night — in the very beginning — *he* had come into her life. Allard followed with horror and indignation the story of treachery, betrayal, shame. When it was finished, the girl lay for a time exhausted among the pillows. "I do not know what it all means, *amigo*," she broke the silence once more, "but I—I wished so to please him! He told me to write the note to you and ask you, for my dead mother's sake, to come to-night and see me dance. He made me promise to call you from the stage, loud, loud. I wanted to please him. Where is he? Oh — it is — you, Maxime, *mi hermano*. Why — when did you — come?"

"What is his name?" demanded Allard sharply. "Who — "

"*Angel de los Cielos* — Maxime, it is very — dark!"

"Who is the man?"

“ It is—dark. *Madre de Diós*, how it—is—dark! *Madre d—*”

Her voice ceased suddenly. Her secret had died with her.

XIII

MIDI

THE crumbling oven-tomb of those dead-and-gone Allards, whose plantation once embraced the fine sweep of land lakeward from an elbow of Bayou St. Jean, and the magnificent live-oaks, moss-festooned, which cast gigantic circles of shade on the greensward below,—these alone remain to witness the chateau of the *ancien régime*, and the famous dueling-ground of a later day. The open, if ever furrowed by plow or turned by spade, shows no trace of either; and not even a ruined chimney marks the site of the vanished plantation-house. The tangled underbrush,—the fanlike latanier, semi-tropical vines, and flaming swamp-flowers,—which made fantastic setting to those scenes enacted here in gray dawnlight following nights of revelry, when rapier or dueling-pistol spoke the final word of the quarrel, has been cleared away. A trim park with well-shaven lawns, decorous

rose trees, and ordered drives and footways, is rapidly outliving the memory of its doubtful, romantic past. An artificial rivulet wanders placidly through soil once streaked with the bluest blood of the old town by the river. Hardly a *fleur-de-lys* remains to make a splotch of wild and heavenly blue, or of gold-dusted pink, in the gentle depression where aforetime rippled a river of color, with clouds of butterflies a-hover above. But the tradition of the *fleur-de-lys* stays on, and in the spring many who go no farther afield in quest of these lilies of France make a pretense of seeking them — in company — under the oaks.

Hither, then, several mornings after the last dance of Pepita, the Cuban, came Madame Berthet and a dozen or more young men and women for the Spring Lily-Meet, as some one has playfully named it. Cortland was among the number, conspicuously attendant upon Miss Carrington, his ordinary taciturnity pervaded by a half-veiled air of triumph. Noémie was pale and distraught; the gay raillery of her companions hardly brought a faint responsive smile to her lips. Seated on a garden bench, her hands closed listlessly over the single *fleur-de-lys* which had rewarded the quest,

she gazed down the leaf-shaded vistas, where scattered, Watteau-like groups strayed. Suddenly Strang, covertly watching her, saw a quick flush dye her white throat and mount to her cheeks; her form stiffened, a defiant fire leaped into her eyes. He followed her glance. A couple of servants were approaching carrying covered hamper-s; behind them Allard, who had just turned in at the park gate, walked briskly, hat in hand, the light breeze lifting the dark curls from his forehead.

“Is this exuberant welcome for me or for the well-seasoned meats borne before me?” he demanded, laughing, as the group, with the exception of Noémie and Cortland, closed noisily around him.

“You! You deserve no welcome!” cried Jeanne Berthet; “neither do you deserve a nibble, even, of the well-seasoned meats! You, who come—”

“At the eleventh hour, while we have borne the heat and burden of the lily-hunting,” interpolated Masters.

“You, who plainly come only for the breakfast!” finished Jeanne.

“I, mademoiselle? But I come, me, to view the tomb of my ancestors”—he made a flourish with his hat, and smiled brightly over at Noémie, whose eyes were full upon his. She answered the smile with a cool stare which swept him from head to foot; then, turning abruptly, she laid her hand upon Cortland’s arm. They walked away together, shoulder almost touching shoulder, and passed across a foot-bridge to a little island lying like an emerald on the bosom of the still stream. Here, underneath a feathery cypress, they stood face to face, apparently oblivious of everything and everybody save themselves. A second of gasping silence among the onlookers followed this astonishing manœuvre; the blood rushed to Allard’s face and receded, leaving it white and set. But there seemed hardly a break in his speech. “As I was saying,” he continued, in the same mock-heroic tone, “I make, to-day, my annual pilgrimage to the tomb of my fathers,—the long-gone Allards of the *habitation Allard*. Adieu, *mesdames et messieurs*, I go to commune with their dust.” He turned away.

“You will come back to breakfast, Maxime?” urged Madame Berthet, visibly disturbed.

“A thousand pardons, madame,” he smiled over his shoulder; “after a funeral one desires — meditation.”

“Hard hit, poor boy!” remarked Masters, looking after the departing soldier; “I do not wonder, myself! But why the devil should any girl, above all Noémie Carrington, prefer a cad, — a hound, I should say,” — he interjected, under his breath, “like Cortland, to a gentleman like Allard!”

A chorus of feminine voices, for and against, blocked further criticism on his part. Under cover of this the pallor of Strang, almost as great as that of Allard, escaped notice. Mechanically his hand had sought the withered rosebud in his breast-pocket; his lips moved.

*Un peu d'amour,
Un peu de rêve,
Et puis — bonjour!*

he repeated to himself. His eyes were fixed, not upon the two sunlighted figures, standing together upon their green island, but upon Allard’s solitary figure seated in thick shadow on the crumbling tomb under the horizon.

Noémie meantime was suffering an agony of shamed reaction. The sight of Allard, coming

with springing step toward her, had moved her to a frenzy of anger. "His treachery to me is past forgiveness," she had thought tumultuously; "his dishonor in stooping to such a *liaison* is shameless enough; but that he should dare to show himself here—anywhere!—with that smile on his lips, when that poor, bedizened creature who died in his arms is hardly yet cold in her grave! It is monstrous!"

The one desire uppermost in her mind was to escape his hated presence; to show him by some overt act, not only her scorn of him, but the gulf that henceforth yawned between them.

Anger and scorn still possessed her; but with these now mingled a sense of maidenly shame at her own sudden defiance of convention. Yes! She loved Cortland; this she had told herself stormily over and over again during the past three or four days. She meant to marry him. Only not yet! "Yes, I think I am sure; but—wait a little," she said, almost humbly now,—for Cortland, out of hearing, but in full sight of the others, was urging an open engagement.

"So be it!" he said exultantly. He bent to brush from her laces a gray spider which had

crawled from the half-open heart of a rose on her bosom. To Allard the movement must have had the appearance, as Cortland instantly divined, of lover-like familiarity. The thought added further to the intoxication of his triumph. "Now!" he murmured half-aloud, "now I am paid. I am paid!" His mind had once more leaped irresistibly back into the past, and lighted upon a moment when he, the barefoot boy, standing like a whipped cur between the planter whose desk he had robbed and the grinning black body-servant who had caught him in the act, had registered a silent vow to "get even" in some way with both,—the black and the white! His thoughts ran like flame down the years, touching into vivid glare the various steps by which he had climbed—or fallen; throwing into bold and strange relief things, places, people; illuminating with a broad beam, as if it were a culminating point, the library of the *hôtel de Laussan* where an old woman and her sometime slave quivered under his touch. His! the poor white! An insolent smile parted his lips; his time had indeed come. Yonder the wondering gang of aristocrats; here the whipped cur—and the beautiful young—

Noémie's voice broke in upon his orgy of vain-glory. "Let us join the others," she said dully.

Allard had already quitted the old brick tomb. Noémie felt, rather than saw, his tall figure moving rapidly toward the upper gate of the park, as she followed Cortland across the foot-bridge and up the flower-starred slope. His clear halloo came floating back. Lifting her eyes in spite of herself, she caught a final glimpse of him stepping upon the platform of a passing car.

XIV

SIRÈNE

SIRÈNE came out of the Cathedral St. Louis by the side door which gives upon the Allée St. Antoine, and sped homeward. Her eyes under their thick, black brows resembled the eyes of a bloodhound; there were red flames in their tawny depths. "I have broken the oath which I took with my hands between the hands of my mistress," she muttered, edging along the house fronts with the quick, stealthy grace of a wild-cat. "My bones will crumble in my body before I die; the meat will rot into shreds upon them. But the Little Mistress will have peace. 'Sieur Maxime will see to it that the Little Mistress has peace. And the child, Noémie, will be set free. Can any one blind the eyes of Sirène? The child has been voodooed by that dog of a buckra-man." She spat into the air. "Ohé! son of the devil, there is a man at your heel now. He will get the letter; and when the letter is

burned, it is the woman at your back, it is Sirène, who will bring the curse upon you!"

Left behind, in the semi-obscurity of the cathedral, Allard waited, giving the mulattress time to reach her home. He slipped out of the high, wooden pew where he had listened to the revelation poured in fierce undertones into his strained ears by the black-robed figure kneeling at his elbow, and walked back to the vestibule. There, leaning against the wrought-iron railing which protects the baptismal font, he went over in his mind the fragmentary story, trying to fit the apparently irrelevant parts into something like a connected whole. Much remained inexplicable, but he had gathered enough to fill him with horror and apprehension. The officer who had led Butler's Provost Guard into the de Laussan house that long-gone day was — Cortland's father! Cortland's father! It required an effort to tear his thoughts away from this astounding fact. Cortland's father had stolen — the word was Sirène's — a jeweled box which contained, among other valuables, a letter of the greatest importance to Madame de Laussan, and to Mam'selle Noémie. Cortland had threatened the Little Mis-

tress with this letter. No, the child did not know about the letter; she did not know that Cortland's father was a Yankee thief; the poor *bébé* was voodooed by that son of the devil. The Little Mistress was afraid; the Little Mistress had already paid many thousands of dollars to Cortland to give her that letter. But, though he promised, he keeps the letter, the dog of hell! He wants the child, Noémie; he will buy the poor little angel with the letter — No, the child knows nothing; she is voodooed. Can any one blind the eyes of Sirène, who nursed her and her mother before her?

Through the velvety shadows of the cathedral Allard saw the red flames shoot into the woman's suddenly lifted eyes. No, she could not tell 'Sieur Maxime what was in the letter (she shivered as if struck by a north wind), since, after all, he might not find it — and then, why should he know? Besides, she had broken one oath, taken with her hands between the hands of the Little Mistress; but when she had sworn not to tell what was in the letter her heart was against the heart of the Little Mistress! "Get that letter for the love of God, 'Sieur Maxime,'" she had ended,

with a piteous break in her voice; “and afterward —” She shook her head until the great hoops in her ears beat her jaws with their dull gold. “I know not where that letter is. He says—tongue of a liar!—that he has given it to his lawyer to keep. Therefore, I know he keeps it himself. It must be that he carries it about his body, for I have searched his bedchamber in the boarding-house where he lives. Oh, but his chest, his portmanteau, his mattress, his pillows, the clock on his mantel, the matting on his floor. It is not there.”

“Sh-h!” A young priest, attracted by an unwonted stir of voices, was walking down the broad aisle. “Go, Sirène,” whispered Allard; “I will —”

He had not finished the sentence. The mulattress, with a nod of complete confidence, had arisen from her knees and was gliding toward the door; she dipped her fingers in the vessel of holy water as she passed it, and crossed herself devoutly.

Allard concerned himself less about the mysterious letter than about another point in Sirène’s story. The letter, he argued, could only be some

document relating to the de Laussan estate — perhaps a will which might involve the passing of the de Laussan property, on the death of her great-aunt and adopted grandmother, to some other than Noémie; at all events, some bugbear which Monsieur Paturin could long ago have put to rout if Madame de Laussan had not so unaccountably fallen into terror of a villain, working for ends of his own upon her fears. Allard burned with indignation, remembering Madame de Laussan's visit to the money-lender, — so inexplicable to him at the time, — the face, white and drawn, in the shadows of the carriage, the trembling fingers clasped about an oblong package! He recalled the sudden withdrawal of the *grande dame* from the world in which she had so long moved, a power and a delight; and Noémie's wistful anxiety about her. *Noémie!* the name pushed itself like a thorn into his sore heart. Here was the vital point of Sirène's disclosures. He smiled scornfully over the old bonne's notion of a voodoo spell; that Noémie Carrington really loved this base creature he had come to understand but too well. But oh, the shame of it! the pity of it! An exquisite, white flower dropped

into filth and slime ; a dainty, winged spirit caught in the maw of an unclean monster ! "She is not for me," he murmured, threading his way through the dusky stillness of the cathedral, and stepping out into the mellow afternoon sunshine. "She has shown me, publicly, the scorn with which she regards me ; yet for the life of me I cannot understand — unless it be that Cortland has poisoned her mind — why she is so changed toward me ! No, she is not for me. But she shall be saved from that scoundrel — in spite of herself if need be ! "

He crossed Jackson Square, the ancient Place d'Armes, which smelled of violets and roses. Beyond, the electric car, whirling him toward the Barracks, was hindered for a moment on a corner. Glancing without intention into a common grog-shop which faced the levee, he caught a glimpse of the man uppermost in his thoughts. Cortland was leaning against the sloppy bar ; he was alone, and held in his upraised hand a glass of liquor ; his face was flushed ; an unpleasant leer sat in his eyes. It was all Allard could do to keep from leaping from the car to fling himself upon the solitary drinker and throttle him where he stood.

XV

THE LETTER

THE next night Captain Allard, too pre-
occupied and too self-absorbed to remain at
the club where he had dined with some friends,
passed with a quick, military tread across Canal
Street, and entered the French Quarter by way
of Rue Bourbon. He had, it must be confessed,
the half-formed intention of ringing boldly at
the de Laussan door and demanding an interview
with—Madame de Laussan? Noémie? He had
not got far enough to decide which, or what he
should say to one or the other in excuse for his
intrusion. Stay, should he not rather see Cort-
land, and tax him outright with his baseness?
He instantly rejected this proposition as prema-
ture, knowing that he would be at a disadvan-
tage in the presence of the man whom Noémie—
loved.

He walked on uncertainly. The street between
the tall, steep-roofed houses became more and

more filled with shadow as he proceeded. Here and there, in those *îlets* nearest Canal Street, people were sitting on the banquettes after the familiar and pleasant fashion of the Quarter; window shutters were outflung; voices came drifting out. Through one open door he saw young people gathered about a piano; they were singing snatches from grand opera. Down long alleyways, pitch-dark, he divined courtyards which sent into the night air the breath of night-blooming jessamine. Moving swiftly along, he came at length to the arcade of the French Opera House. The season was long over, and the heavy boarding which protects the entrance-stairs and the offices below was in place; the shadows within the arcade open to the street were thick and close; a musty odor as of dead "seasons" and singers clung to them. A light burned in the small café nearly opposite. As Allard passed under the pillared arcade, a man appeared in the doorway of the café; he stood for a moment silhouetted against the yellow glare, a hand on either jamb; then he descended the low steps and crossed the street with an unsteady gait. He stepped upon the opposite banquette and

lurched heavily against Allard, righting himself with difficulty. "D—n you!" he growled in a thick voice, "can't you keep yo' own shide th' fench!" It was Cortland. "Gimme light," he continued. He steadied himself with a hand on the officer's shoulder. Allard obeyed mechanically, his thoughts darting about in a blind attempt to seize the word which might turn this opportune meeting to account. Even his disgust of the man, augmented by his present condition, was lost in this fever of excitement. He produced his match-box. The match flared up, the thin flume of flame wavering in the night air. "Hullo! Ish you, hey?" Cortland exclaimed, with drunken familiarity. "Ish Allar'! D—n fool, Allar'!" He laughed foolishly, making an unsuccessful effort to fit the end of his cigar to the light in Allard's hand. "Goo' joke on you, old man!" He essayed a poke under his companion's ribs, and was saved a fall by Allard's timely arm. "Goo' joke on Allar'!"

"Do you think so?" Allard said carelessly. "I don't think much of it myself."

"Oh! you don't, hey!" The thick voice, stirred to obstinate anger, was almost sobered. "Well,

I do. I worked it, d—n me, I worked it. Goo' joke, I shay ! ”

“ How did you work it ? ” Allard asked it with great deference.

Cortland laughed ; again a note of cunning mingled with his inane cackle.

“ I tol' Pep-p-pita — you 'member Pep-p-p-pita, hey ? Cu-b-b-b — d—n it ! Pep-p — *dansher*. Devlish goo'-looker, you know — ”

“ You — you told Pepita ? ”

“ Tol' Pepp — *her*, d—n it ! *dansher*, tol' her I 'd m-marry her if she 'd write note to Allar', 'n if she 'd holler for Allar'. She did it aw ri'. Devlish goo'-looker Pepp — d—n it ! *Dansher*. Goo' joke ! Ha ! Ha ! ”

“ Ha ! Ha ! ” echoed Allard, like a parrot. “ Good joke on Allard. Did n't know you had it in you, Cortland.”

Cortland straightened himself at the flattery, patting his crumpled shirt front with a pleased hand. “ Thought I wash fool, hey ? May be po' whi' trash, but no fool, no fool, d—n you, no fool.”

“ You are a genius ! ” cried Allard, admiringly, his fist clinched, his nails digging into the palms

of his hands, his teeth drawing blood from his lips.

Cortland wagged his head solemnly. "Pep-p-pita wrote note to Allar' ! Shee ? D—n fool, Allar' ! He comes to shee danshe. Noémie comes too. I shee to that."

"*What !*" shouted Allard, off his guard.

But Cortland was too full of himself to note the sudden angry outcry. "Noémie !" he repeated, started upon a new tack by the introduction of the name. "D—d fine filly, Noémie. Goin' to run her myself in nex' rashe. Shay, ole boy, you know ashtocratic white-headed ole girl ? Missus de Laussan ? Hates me ! Goo' joke. I've got letter. Ever shee letter ? "

The coarse voice was thickening. Allard had lost the power of speech. His eyes, accustomed to the obscurity, were fastened on Cortland's hand fumbling in an inner pocket; the diamond on the little finger, scintillating in the light of the cigar in the man's mouth, appeared and disappeared. "Where devil *ish* letter ?" muttered the drunken seeker, dragging forth a notebook and thrusting it back. "Reckon *ish* losh." A couple of men passing up the street echoed his braying laugh.

Allard waited in an agony of impatience. But Cortland, his attention distracted by a passing car, had already veered about.

“Shay, I’m d—d thirsty!” he announced; and, chanting the chorus of a vulgar ballad, he recrossed the street, staggering, to the cabaret. Allard watched him, again framed for a second in the doorway, then disappearing into the dim-lit interior. He felt baffled, defeated, impotent; stunned, besides, by the blackness of the soul into which he had gazed.

He turned; something caught in a corner of his outer pocket slipped and fell with a whispering rustle to the ground. He stooped to pick it up, thrilled to feel between his fingers the thin, foreign, folded paper.

Fifteen minutes later he sat in a private room at a nearby restaurant. An open letter lay on the table, under his hand; he smoothed it out, rereading again and again the dim lines on the yellowed paper. It was dated April, 1861, and signed, “Gabrielle Verac de Laussan.”

XVI

A CONSULTATION

TOWARD ten o'clock the same evening Major Léon Grandchamps sat dozing in his great armchair. His sumptuous bachelor apartment in Rue Rampart—for the major had been a widower these thirty years—was flooded with light. On a table at the sleeper's elbow were a couple of decanters, a tray of tall-stemmed glasses, a rack of pipes, a tobacco-jar filled with Périque, and a box of Habanos, which gave out a subtle aroma to the warm air. Roses from the ancient garden in the rear of the Grandchamps mansion filled the crystal vases on the mantel; a pair of fencing-foils were laid across the solitaire-board which rested upon the tabouret at the major's knee; a sword which had been under discussion the night before glittered unsheathed, on a card-table set out with lighted candles in silver candelabra and fresh packs of cards. The major was in evening dress, a pleasant duty he imposed

upon himself even when he dined alone, as he had done this evening.

From that half of the house presided over by the major's widowed daughter, Madame Berthet, there came, borne across intervening halls, but muffled by many portière doors, the sound of music intermingled with the hum of voices and the echoes of light laughter. It was the evening at home of Madame and Mademoiselle Berthet. Later, doubtless, the major would drop in upon his daughter and her guests.

The sharp clang of the bell at his private entrance awoke the sleeper. He sat up, smilingly expectant. It was a full hour and more earlier than the *Cercle* was wont nightly to assemble. *Quelle chance, mon Dieu!* He rubbed his slim hands delightedly, and arose, casting the host's last critical glance about the long salon. César, his old factotum,—valet, butler, chef,—presently appeared, sweeping back the heavy curtain draping the doorway. A quick tread sounded along the hall; the negro turned one wild, apprehensive glance over his shoulder toward the approaching guest, and another upon his master. “Monsieur le Capitaine Maxime Allard!” he announced pom-

pously. “Pardon, ‘Sieur Léon !’” He dropped the curtain and fled before the purple wrath upon his master’s face.

“Monsieur le Cap—” gasped Major Grandchamps ; “what audacity ! How dare you ?” he began in his precise French. His eyes fell upon the tall, slim young man, attired in obtrusive, unornamented dark blue, and his manner underwent swift transition from angry protest to joyous hospitality. The old eyes sparkled, the purple in the furrowed face turned to welcoming red. “Fernand Allard ! *Mon vieux !*” he cried, “it is thou ! At last ! Ah, but I have missed thee, my comrade, my brother !” He opened wide his arms. Allard controlled an impulse to throw himself into those arms, which had often been the refuge of his childhood.

“I wish it were my father, sir,” he said quietly. “But may not the son of Fernand Allard claim somewhat, too ? I am Maxime.”

“May the devil choke you and your father on the same potato !” roared the old man, his anger increased tenfold by his own misapprehension. “You—you scoundrel ! How dare you pollute this house by entering it with the brand

of the Yankee on your back, and the brand of a traitor on your forehead — ”

“ Major Grandchamps, I beg you to hear me,” interrupted Allard, advancing.

“ You will leave this house, sir. On the instant, Captain Allard. Your presence here, sir, is more than an impertinence. It is an insult ! ”

“ What I have to say,” insisted Allard, taking advantage of the major’s necessity to find breath to proceed, “ is of the greatest moment. It concerns neither you nor myself, but your kinswoman and ward, Mademoiselle Noémie CARRINGTON.”

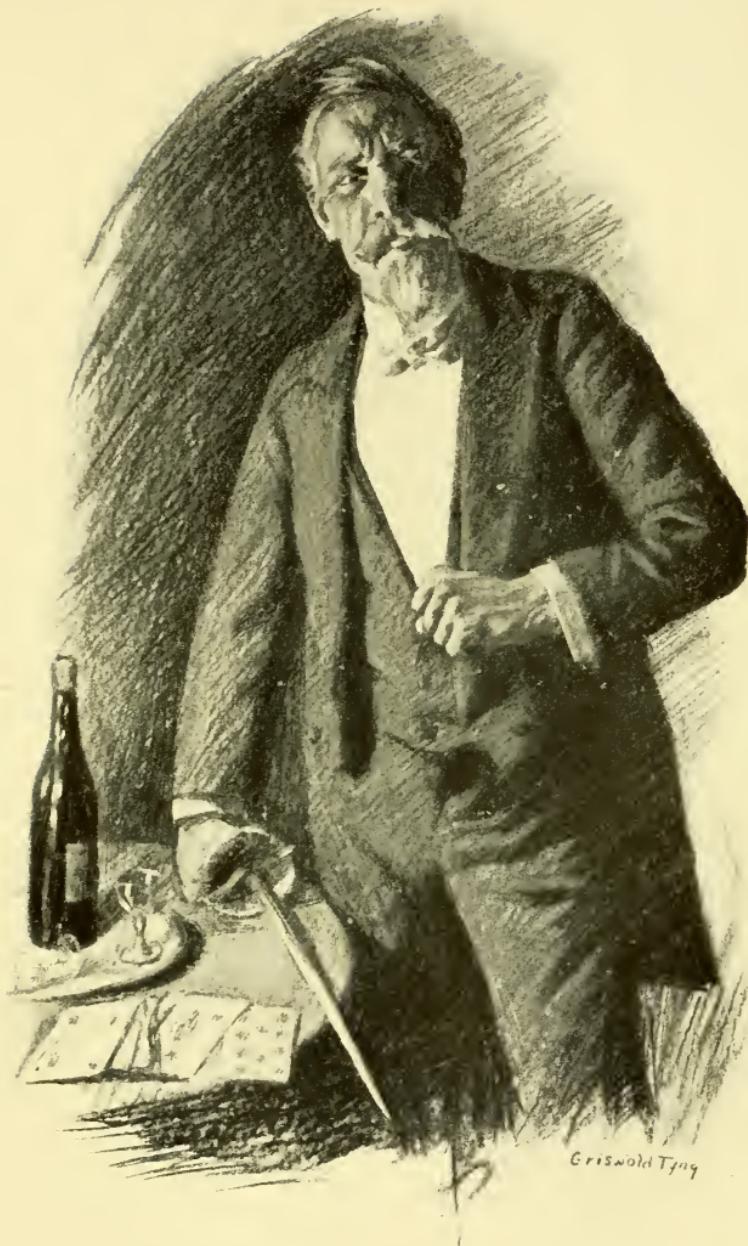
“ Ah ! ” The words seemed to lash the major into an uncontrollable fury. “ Maxime Allard, if you soil that name again upon your lips, I will run you through like a dog. By God, I will rid the world of a rascal, anyhow ! ” He seized the naked sword as he spoke, and rushed blindly forward.

“ And I tell you, by God, that you *shall* hear me ! ” cried Allard, springing to one side, and then leaping upon the infuriated veteran. He wrenched the weapon from the shaking hand that held it, and flung it behind him, and quietly

but firmly forced the spare form backward and into the armchair. Then, without giving him time to recover breath, he began in a clear and steady voice to state the object of his visit.

This time the purple in the old cheeks faded to a ghastly pallor; amazed, incredulous ejaculations burst from the quivering lips. "Impossible!" he whispered at length. "Impossible!—Poor Gabrielle! She may be living still—I do not know. But Armand de Laussan, poor boy, he is long dead. He fell at Manassas—the letter seems to be genuine. Stay, I will compare it—" He got up stiffly and took a bundle of time-worn letters from a tall *escritoire*, running them over as he returned to his chair. "The same. I thought so. Gabrielle's handwriting was unlike any other I have ever seen. What a light on her inexplicable flight! But impossible! Monstrous!"

The stream of words fell as if unconsciously from his lips; his eyes were half closed. "Let me think again. I was in Paris myself just before Armand de Laussan—the brother of Nemours, who married my cousin Laure Destrehan—married *la belle* Gabrielle. May I ask how this letter came into your possession, Captain Allard?"



MAJOR GRANDCHAMPS

he opened his eyes to demand sharply. His hand rested on the page signed “Gabrielle Verac de Laussan ;” it was spread out on the table in the steady light of the candles.

“Pardon, Major Grandchamps,” returned the younger man, after a moment of hesitation, during which he swiftly determined that Cortland’s connection with the affair — his origin, his character, his schemes — should for the present remain known to himself alone ; “pardon, but with your permission I will reserve my answer to this question for a later time. But I assure you —”

“ You are the son of Fernand Allard — may the devil fly away with him ! I need no further assurance. Are the contents of the letter known to any one beside yourself ?”

“ Unfortunately, yes. Therefore, we must act at once.” He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead ; a vision of Cortland’s drunken face, leering at him across the feeble glare of a match, rising before him.

“ At once ! ” Major Grandchamps squared his shoulders. “ How soon can you start for France ? ” he asked, drawing paper and pen toward him, and adjusting his *pince-nez*.

“Almost immediately. My furlough is due, and, happily, it may be extended to two months, or longer, as I have had no leave since I went out to the Philippines.”

“Good! It will take time.” The old man wrote rapidly for some moments; he added to the letter, addressed to “M. Henri Saint-Cyr, avocat, rue des Capucines, Paris, France,” a slip covered with memoranda,—notes, names, suggestions, addresses,—and handed both to Allard. “It is I who should go,” he said, after the intimate consultation which followed; “but I am not so young as I was *dans le temps*! I should be snapped up by the gout after my first dinner with Saint-Cyr, hélas!” He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes again. “La belle Gabrielle!” he sighed softly. “Good God! the thing is impossible! *Pauvre enfant!*”

“Has he forgotten Noémie?” wondered the young man, with a jealous pang. “And Madame de Laussan!”

“One thing more, Major Grandchamps,” he added aloud, rising and placing the letter and memoranda, with Madame Armand de Laussan’s long-lost note, in his breast-pocket; he laid a

not over-steady hand on the back of a chair as he confronted his host. “One thing more. Mademoiselle Carrington —”

“She does not know?” cried Major Grandchamps, starting up in alarm.

“No, oh, no! God forbid that she should ever know. But — Mademoiselle Carrington is, I believe, betrothed to Mr. Sidney Cortland” — he spoke the name with an effort.

“Yes, I know. He is, in my opinion, a cad. But my cousin, Madame de Laussan —”

“Major Grandchamps, may I ask you, without for the moment exposing my reasons therefor, to promise me that this — marriage shall not take place during my absence?”

“I will, gladly. Besides, it is necessary under the circumstances — the supposed circumstances. No man would offer —”

Allard winced visibly.

“I desire,” he interrupted, gripping the back of the chair still more firmly, “before I go, to make through you the offer of my hand to Mademoiselle Noémie Carrington —”

“*Maxime!*” The major sprang up, his face expressing at once admiration and unbelief.

“You cannot mean it! When this—this doubt is removed— if this doubt should be removed, then—”

“I love Noémie,” Allard broke in, with a proud uplift of the head. “I have always loved her. Whatever happens—if she should find herself free, if—she should not marry—Cortland, and if I am fortunate enough to win her love, I would be the happiest man alive with her for my wife. Please remember this, sir, whatever happens! And now—” he inclined his head in a formal salute, speaking in a conventional voice —“permit me once more to crave the pardon of Monsieur le Major Grandchamps for intruding upon him, and for a certain roughness toward him which, under other circumstances, would be unforgivable.”

Major Grandchamps listened with a gravity equal to Allard’s own. “Maxime, you young puppy!” he shouted at length, bursting into a laugh which was half a sob. “You are your father’s own cub! Did he ever tell you—but of course he did not, the *tête de bois*!—how he carried me to the rear, with a shot through my leg, from the field of the Wilderness, grape and

canister raining on him the whole way, the madman! And then cut my acquaintance when I came out of hospital because I made blackberry *crêpes* without sugar — when there was n't a grain of sugar within a hundred miles of us!" He stopped to laugh uproariously. "He is the most obstinate fellow alive, d—n him! I'll fight him yet for turning you into a Yankee, the cabbage-pate! *I wish you a good-morning, Major Grandchamps*, says your bulldogship, with your jaw set like a rock. I won't have it, sir, do you hear? Don't shake your head at me, your renegade! Come here, rascal, *vaurien* uniform and all! *Who am I, sir?* Why, I am your uncle Grandchamps, that's who! your *parrain*, that's who!" He opened wide his arms once more, and this time Maxime, with a rush of happy tears to his eyes, leaped into the old shelter.

XVII

CORTLAND

CORTLAND'S physical discomfort on awaking some hours after midnight from the drunken slumber which had overtaken him in the cabaret on Rue Bourbon was not improved by an uneasy if vague consciousness of having talked in his cups. But — to whom? And — of what? It was some time before he could remember anything clearly, and when Allard's face, as he had seen it by the light of a match, did dawn into his mind, he recalled broken fragments only of his own aimless maunderings. He knew his power of silence too well to dream that any reference to the girl whom he had so heartlessly betrayed — Pepita, the Cuban — had escaped his lips. He would have staked his life against the mere suggestion of self-betrayal in a matter so vital to himself as the stolen letter.

His rage and alarm on discovering the loss of the letter were extreme. Failing to find it in the

memorandum-book where he kept it, or anywhere about his person, he rushed, completely sobered by this piece of ill-luck, to his rooms, and sought for it there as thoroughly as Sirène had done, cheating himself with the hope that he might, absently, have placed it in some hiding-place there. His search, needless to record, was as fruitless as Sirène's own. As he threw himself, baffled and overdone, into a chair, he had one of those flashes of light, unaccountable, mysterious, which sometimes illumine a single spot, a word, a gesture, on the canvas of memory, leaving all else in darkness; he saw, as if with his bodily eyes, the thin envelope detach itself from the sheaf of papers in his hand and flutter slowly outward; at the same time a sense of the nearness of the Théâtre de l'Opéra strengthened the slight clue. He hurried back to the arcade — at that hour absolutely deserted — and spent a breathless half hour groping within the thick shadow; thridding with eager fingers the débris of the open gutter along the banquette; pursuing wind-blown scraps of paper — in vain.

For weeks thereafter he expected daily to hear his long-guarded and negotiable secret exploited

at the clubs, on the streets, in drawing-rooms, in drinking-shops. He made a pretext for an early visit to Madame de Laussan in order to draw conclusions from any possible change in her attitude toward him, or in that of her yellow tigress ; he watched Noémie's face, pale and listless, — from the summer's heat, they said. But as the days passed and nothing happened, his confidence returned. He assured himself that the insignificant-looking envelope, drifted into some receptacle for waste, had been carted off to oblivion. Nevertheless, a residuum of doubt remained which spurred him to renewed effort to obtain from Noémie the definite pledge which she continued to withhold. Hitherto he had had the letter to be used as an argument in case the old woman should balk. Now — well, the girl he wanted, and her money ! were at stake ; he set his jaws together.

To do him justice, the man loved Noémie Carrington with all that was best — and worst — in his nature. The light which burned in his soul for her was not one of those pure and ardent flames which sometimes glow like stars in the midst of sordid and depraved souls, as unsullied by the vice about them as a star by miasmatic

fog. It was rather a lurid and sulphurous blaze in which there mingled slight threads of purer fire. The baser part of him fed his desire to possess this exquisite creature who had come so strangely into his life — a legacy from his father, he sometimes declared to himself, with an exultant sneer. Absent from her, he gloated feverishly over the memory of her charms, swearing to push, at their very next meeting, the power he believed himself to have over her to the utmost extreme. At such times he would rush to her house, fling himself like a maniac into her presence — to stand humbled before her, cowed into decency by that nameless atmosphere which envelops innocent womanhood. Once more out of her sight, he would fall into blasphemous rage over what he called his own cowardice, crying aloud to the empty silence of his chamber his determination to subdue her to his will ; to make her fetch and carry for him like a slave ; to beat her as he would beat a dog. At rare moments, coupling her name with his mother's, he fell on his knees, calling God to witness that he would no more sully the purity of the one than the memory of the other. In still rarer moments he told him-

self, with an oath, that he would marry the girl if she were penniless ; but this assertion was invariably followed by a sardonic grin at his own expense, and the self-admonition : “ Not much, you would n’t, Sid, my son. Drive ahead, the prizes, both of ’em, are pretty nearly yours ; and if worst comes to worst, you — and the old woman — know the letter by heart.”

Nothing of all this, however, appeared in Cortland’s outward manner. Toward Madame de Laussan, indeed, whom he continued to see at intervals, he maintained an air of insolent familiarity, quite aware that, having herself once more under control, she was watching, warily, his slightest move. It pleased him to keep alive and quivering the terror which he detected under her calm exterior. To the rest of that upper world in which he moved more and more freely, he continued to present the same semi-mysterious aspect, so fascinating to women. He had learned at length the art of seeming to hold himself aloof from the men who avoided him. In the underworld, the congenial atmosphere of which expanded his cramped lungs, he paid himself liberally for all this reticence.

And Noémie ? With the sudden departure of Allard for France, a bandage fell from her eyes. She read her own motives by the pitiless light of self-examination. The glamour which had once attached to Cortland was long since dissipated. She saw him, not, indeed, as he really was, but at least as a man of coarse fibre, commonplace, uninteresting, persistent, tiresome ; yet she had suffered, nay, encouraged his advances, first through coquetry, then from resentment at Allard's interference, finally in a frenzy of eagerness to show the latter that the lover of Pepita, the dancer, was less than nothing to Noémie Carrington. She appeared at length loathsome in her own eyes ; a thousand times more culpable than Maxime, who at least had not been ashamed to let the world see his infatuation for his light o' love. She remembered with pity and self-torture the accusing sadness in his eyes that morning in the Park when, his heart already wrung—oh, she knew it now ! Cortland had told her !—over the death of the girl he loved, she herself had stabbed him so cruelly, so needlessly ! The recollection of the solitary figure leaning against the old tomb was an ever-present accusa-

tion. He had gone abroad, so Cortland had assured her, to seek through absence and new surroundings some solace for his grief. She groaned aloud, pacing the night away in her dim-lit boudoir. Oh, yes, Donald was right. There came a time. *She knew.* It was too late, forever too late, but at last she knew. The river had broken its dikes ; she loved him, Allard, Pepita's lover.

Her first impulse had been to rid herself of Cortland ; he had become in a moment repulsive to her, though she blamed herself bitterly for this feeling, which seemed alike unjust to him and unworthy of herself. During all these months she had been reasoning herself into the belief that she — almost — loved him. She had given him reason to suppose that she would be his wife. Now the thought filled her with horror ; it could not, could not be !

But, for the first time in her life, Madame de Laussan, after hearing her frank confession, set her granddaughter's wish aside. She forbade the girl, sternly, to break with Cortland. "Not yet, dear child, not yet," she added, almost pleadingly, after her first vehement outburst. Noémie

gazed at her with anxious eyes, feeling in the well-known accents a strange vibration of terror.

“Things must go on as they are, for the present. I command you,” reiterated Madame de Laussan.

Noémie bowed her head silently.

“*Ohé, 'sieur le vipère !*” exulted Sirène; “who can blind the eyes of Sirène ? Me, I have known from the first that the child was voodooed ! But the spell was broken. Nevertheless, *mon bébé*, wait, wait ! Let him think what he please ! 'Tite Maîtresse will give the word. Wait, *bébé*, wait.”

XVIII

A MORNING CALL

NOÉMIE waited, she knew not for what. One morning Cortland, making his customary visit, found the young girl in the billiard-room. A wood-fire crackled in the fireplace, for the early November day was unusually bleak, — one of those never-expected days which, in Louisiana, follow, and sometimes precede, midsummer warmth, and cause the casual sojourner to glare, in his overcoat or furs, at the native, and demand, with studied sarcasm, to be introduced to the sunny South! A small rosewood work-table of antique shape, with brass mountings, stood at Noémie's elbow; an orderly disarray of embroidery-silks lay in her lap; her eyes were upon the spray of roses growing upon the strip under her busy needle.

Cortland, drawing a chair near her, sat down to feast his eyes upon her perhaps not wholly unconscious face,—for it was immediately suffused

with a rising tide of color. She had never, he thought, seemed so desirable, so necessary to his comfort. But he kept back the words which crowded to his lips ; he had learned to avoid certain quicksands ; he had seen with growing irritation and alarm the involuntary stiffening of the slight figure, the withdrawal in the deep eyes, at the slightest reference to a future which included himself with her. Was she about to escape him, after all ? His hands trembled a little with repressed emotion — a little also from the effects of last night's orgy. He rested them on the work table, and so, inadvertently, touched a hidden spring in a bit of carving. He started back, for a small drawer shot open. Noémie smiled involuntarily at the startled expression on his face.

“ My secret drawer,” she explained, “ which, as you see, reveals itself with unblushing readiness to the first comer.”

“ Not an inviolate hiding-place, certainly,” he agreed. “ What is this ? The Lost Will ? The chart to a Monte Cristo Island ? ” He extended to her the folded paper he had taken from the little drawer.

“ That,” she said carelessly, unfolding and re-

turning the sketch to his hand, “is a drawing of the famous Lafayette Sword — *le sabre de mon père*. L’oncle Grandchamps made it for me, from memory, many years ago. I was simply daft about that sword. When I was a child I used to dream all sorts of romantic and impossible dreams about it and about my little uncle Pierre.” She glanced through an open door, across an intervening study or den, at the outer vestibule which gave upon Pierre’s Terrace. “I besought St. Anthony of Padua nightly, with tears, to let me find it, or if he would not grant this boon, at least to restore it to its rightful place upon the wall. Daily I stole into the library to see if a miracle had been accomplished.” She spoke with an animation latterly a stranger to her lips.

“But the miracle was not vouchsafed,” he smiled; “since the sword is still in hiding.”

She nodded.

“The sword of the Quest! The Sword of Madame de Laussan’s mighty oath.”

His laugh irritated her. “The sword of my own oath,” she flashed haughtily.

“Do you really consider that oath, as you call it — I call it a joke — binding?” he asked curi-

ously ; “ would you really marry the finder of this wonderful heirloom, whoever he might be ? ”

“ Provided he found it within the Year and the Day,” she said gravely. “ After that, *I am for naebody and naebody is for me.* ” She chanted the line with a slightly defiant air.

“ Then,” said Cortland lightly, “ if I am found prowling about the house at unseasonable hours, in unreasonable places, please remember that such latitude is allowed by Madame de Laussan to the seekers.”

“ It is truly time the Knights were in harness,” — she echoed his light tone. “ It wants but a few weeks to the eighteenth of December. Ah, the sun is out at last ! ”

She arose and walked over to a window which overlooked the courtyard. She was conscious of a vague elation, though she was as yet hardly sensible of the cause. Cortland saw the elation, and instantly divined the cause. “ She means to use that absurd vow as a loophole to throw me over ! ” he thought.

He closed the secret drawer ; the thin *click* of the catch echoed about the silent room.

XIX

GABRIELLE VERAC

MONSIEUR HENRI SAINT-CYR, the distinguished avocat, glanced at the visiting-card brought in by a clerk, and read the short letter of introduction which accompanied it. A moment later he advanced with outstretched hands to meet the tall, soldierly young man who entered. "Welcome to Paris, Monsieur le Capitaine Allard," he said with warmth. "You bring with you"—he touched the letter he held with a thin forefinger—"a world of happy memories. Léon Grandchamps! Grizzled, doubtless, like myself—in your eyes. To me forever young, reckless, gay, daring, impossible! Sit down, captain. Grandchamps! Ah! The young men of the present day are not like those of our time,"—he shook his head deprecatingly. "Youth has become cautious, prudent, sober!"

"This sounds like an echo of l'oncle Grandchamps," thought Allard, listening with amused interest, "when he rhapsodizes on *dans le temps*."

“And the women ! They, too, are become prudent, calculating, cautious. Bah ! Besides, there are nowadays no beautiful women like those of—”

“*Dans le temps !*” murmured Allard involuntarily.

“Eh ? Laugh away, my captain, laugh away !” cried Monsieur Saint-Cyr good-humoredly. “But they were men and women who lived in my day—the day of Léon Grandchamps and myself and—Pardon, my young friend, I grow garrulous. You are come, I see,” he glanced again at the note in his hand, “on a matter of business.” The sudden transition from the gay, reminiscent tone of the moment before to the quick, terse voice, long adjusted to the key of affairs, was almost startling.

“I—I have with me a letter, which—” Allard found himself stammering confusedly.

The lawyer settled the *pince-nez* more firmly on his large nose, drew a chair to his desk, swept aside a mass of papers there, and spread out the yellowed, faintly-rustling sheets handed him by his client.

The letter, addressed to Madame Nemours de

Laussan, was dated, "Avril 14, 1861, La Nouvelle Orléans." It ran:—

LAURE,— When this note reaches your hand, through a messenger who is unacquainted with its contents, but who has promised to withhold it—and the child—for twenty-four hours, I will be already beyond recall. Where I go concerns no one but myself. Why I go I desire you alone to know—you, who have been unfailingly kind to me, though I think you have not liked me; you, to whom I leave the little Mathilde.

I have not been happy in this wretched little village, to which Armand brought me against the wish of my father and my mother, and in spite of his own solemn promise and my frantic prayers. But I would have stayed if—why do I waste words when I have only to tell you that I have learned within the week by a letter from France that my father and my mother, born, the one (Louis) Jasmin, the other (Rosine) Rabut, are *gens de couleur*, as you say here. What a crime, my God! They—or at least my father was well known in Louisiana before he went to France. He was free; my mother and her people

were his slaves. You will believe me when I tell you that I did not know of this stain on my birth—which they say here all the waters of the sea cannot wash away—when I married Armand. But in France I do not think it can be so terrible! I have been long enough in your savage America to know that if this secret were known it would bring bitter disgrace upon Armand, upon his child, and upon the proud family whose name I bear. My going is the price of silence—on the part of my own mother! I leave the child, and the secret, with you; you will be a mother to Mathilde, and this blight need never fall upon her. *Armand must not know.* I charge this upon you. Let him believe, as he will readily believe, that I have been lured back to Paris—anywhere—by those gayeties which he thinks I pine after, and which have no part in this dull corner of the earth. Adieu.

GABRIELLE VERAC DE LAUSSAN.

“Gabrielle Verac!” Monsieur Saint-Cyr covered his eyes with his hand. “Gabrielle Verac! *Mon Dieu!*” he repeated, his voice shaken with some uncontrollable emotion. It seemed to Allard

to express at once longing regret and half-scornful unbelief.

“Did you — pardon, Monsieur Saint-Cyr,” he inquired hesitatingly, “did you also know this Gabrielle Verac?”

“If I knew Gabrielle Verac!” The avocat arose from his chair and paced back and forth the length of the quiet bureau. “If I knew Gabrielle Verac! Does not even a blind man know the sun when it beats upon his eyelids! Beautiful, capricious, heartless, fascinating Gabrielle! Why, my friend, Gabrielle set all Paris by the ears during the brief year that she shone in its sky. She was a maddening draught at which the hearts of all men, *dans le temps*, as you say, sipped, leaving unsatisfied thirst on the lips and in the throat. Léon Grandchamps, by God’s grace,” — he laughed shortly, — “escaped, maybe. I hope so. But the others of what we were pleased to call our set beat our heads to pulp against the wall of her caprice, — Hilaire Chenuaux, Armand de Laussan, Marigny, D’Aulnoy, oh, all of us! quarreled among ourselves; yes, and fought duels into the bargain, over that bewitching piece of snow-fire! Well, Monsieur Allard,

and what have you to do with the Gabrielle Verac who trampled upon men's souls before you were born?"

Again the change from the man to the lawyer, though this time the listener perceived that it was not made without an effort.

"It will take time, and, I foresee, a considerable expenditure—"

"Spare nothing, I beg of you!" interrupted Allard, "neither time nor expense. The matter — pardon, monsieur — is one of life and death."

"All matters are." The lawyer smiled dryly, tapping the desk with a gold pencil. "We will do our utmost, Captain Allard. Come back — let me see — in one month. We have now," he consulted a calendar, "the second of November. Drop in, say, on or about the second of December."

The second of December! It seemed an eternity of waiting. Monsieur Saint-Cyr stood up. The interview was at an end.

"May I ask," ventured Allard, thoroughly chilled by the business-like attitude of the great avocat, "whether Monsieur Saint-Cyr thinks that

this — this story of — mixed blood can be true ? ”

“ It is not unlikely , ” returned the lawyer gravely . “ I trust you are not too much personally interested in the affair ? No hint of such an infusion in the blood of the Veracs ever leaked out here in Paris . But that proves nothing , whereas — However , such conjectures lead nowhere . In the meantime , my dear captain , you must see Paris . ” The genial smile had returned to the strong face . “ It is your first visit ? Ah ! Will you do Madame Saint-Cyr and myself the honor to join us at dinner to-morrow ? Or Sunday ? ”

“ Thanks , Monsieur Saint-Cyr , ” Allard said hastily , “ but I am leaving Paris to-night for — Switzerland and Italy . ” The journey was an impromptu decision ; the interval of waiting would be unbearable in any one place ; any companionship would be maddening . “ On my return , I shall be most happy . ”

“ Gabrielle Verac ! ” muttered the lawyer , when the door had closed on his young client and he was alone in his book-lined office in the Rue des Capucines . He unlocked a drawer of his desk

and rummaged among its contents ; when he had found the oval case he sought, he opened it, and sat long gazing upon the exquisite face which looked out at him from the background of the miniature. The smoke-like eyes, the wonderful pale, crinkled hair, the low, white brow, the dainty chin, — these Gabrielle Verac had bequeathed to her half-American granddaughter whom she had never seen. But the mouth, full, alluring, fickle, and the smile, faintly sensuous, frankly vain, remained Gabrielle's own.

The old man sighed, and a half-cynical chuckle preceded the dropping of the miniature back into the drawer.

XX

A DISENTANGLLED SKEIN

WHEN Allard was ushered into the private office of Monsieur Saint-Cyr on the appointed day, he found a stranger there, an elderly personage, spare, dark, and somewhat severe of aspect. “Monsieur le Juge D’Aulnoy, Capitaine Maxime Allard of the United States Army,” pronounced Monsieur Saint-Cyr formally. “Monsieur D’Aulnoy,” he added in a familiar tone, motioning his visitors to seats and dropping into his own chair, “is one of the comrades of my days of folly, eh, Jacques? He was, like myself — and others! — interested in Mademoiselle Verac. He came up a fortnight ago from Lyons, where he lives, to lend me his aid in the matter which has brought you, Monsieur Allard, to France. The very name of Gabrielle Verac,” he smiled over at the judge, who smiled, but gravely, in return, “remains, after a lapse of forty-five years, a spell to conjure with! But you are impa-



CAPTAIN MAXIME ALLARD

tient, my young friend. At your age, even in these colorless times, one is impatient. I will proceed at once.

“The desired information” — he seated himself comfortably on his cushions and took up a packet of papers — “has been less difficult to procure than I had feared. A couple of cablegrams to New Orleans gave me a fair start. From the replies, in cipher of course,” — he detached two slips from the packet and laid them on one side, — “I learned that Louis Jasmin, *free man of color*” — Allard winced — “Louis Jasmin, in company with Hyppolite Rabut, his wife Thérèse, and Rosine, their daughter, sailed for Havre, France, on the 15th of June, 1837, on board the ship Jupiter. A letter which followed the cablegrams” — he placed it with the telegraph slips — “stated that Jasmin had inherited from his father, likewise a free man of color, a handsome plantation in the Parish of — and a considerable number of negro slaves. In the winter of 1837 he sold the plantation and the negroes, with the exception of a few, among whom were the *famille Rabut*, whom he manumitted; and, having turned all his possessions into money, he left Louisiana, accompa-

nied, as I have said, by Rabut, his wife, and his sixteen-year-old daughter. Before this letter arrived my confidential clerk had examined, in the Bureau of Marine Affairs at Havre, the list of passengers brought over by the Jupiter on her voyage, ending September 27, 1837; upon this list appear the names mentioned. Further research revealed that soon after their arrival at Havre Louis Jasmin and Rosine Rabut were united in marriage.

“In 1840 Louis Jasmin made his appearance at Clamart as Louis Verac. Here he purchased a small chateau, and shortly thereafter installed himself with Madame Verac and their little daughter, Gabrielle, then about two years old.”

Allard, who had been leaning forward, listening eagerly, grew deadly pale, shrinking as if from a blow.

“And here Louis Verac lived until the day of his death, a charitable, honorable, and much respected citizen. No suspicion of the mixed blood of the Veracs seems ever to have entered the heads of their neighbors. But, I hasten,” Monsieur Saint-Cyr proceeded with great deliberation, “to take up the thread of Gabrielle’s story,

— that Gabrielle afterward known, like another enchantress of the same name, as *la belle Gabrielle*.

“ The three years succeeding the marriage of Louis Jasmin and Rosine Rabut were spent quietly by Monsieur and Madame Louis Verac at B., a small village in Brittany. While here the couple adopted — on the death of her widowed mother — the infant daughter of Georges Dupont and Antoinette Morel, his wife, — both, though poor and without immediate ties, belonging to the *petite noblesse*.”

Allard was staring at the speaker with dazed and, as yet, uncomprehending eyes.

“ Many of the older men and women of the village remembered the Veracs — *les Brésiliens, très riches* — very well, and testified to their kindness to Madame Dupont as well as to the adoption of her infant. We took this part of the inquiry upon ourselves — Monsieur D’Aulnoy and myself — for the sake of *Life’s Morning*;” — was there a break in the dry voice? “ The present *curé* of B., at that time an acolyte, himself assisted at the baptism of Marie Louise Gabrielle Dupont. From the parish register — ”

“ Do you mean,” gasped Allard, springing to

his feet and regarding the speaker with out-starting eyes, "that Madame Armand de Laussan — "

"Exactly, monsieur le capitaine. Not a drop! Her blood is as pure as your own."

Allard dropped, trembling, to his seat, and covered his face with his hands. The revulsion was almost more than he could bear.

"From the register," Monsieur Saint-Cyr was repeating, "we copied *l'Acte de Naissance* and *de Baptême* of the daughter of the Duponts. Through the courtesy of monsieur le maire of the village we obtained from the judicial records a copy of the certificate of adoption by Monsieur and Madame Louis Verac of Marie Louise Gabrielle, daughter of Georges and Antoinette Dupont." He laid these documents on the growing pile of papers before him.

"The child, adored by her adoptive parents, whom she believed always to be hers by right of birth, grew up to womanhood, educated and accomplished, in the small but well-appointed chateau at Clamart. In 1858 she came to Paris with the Countess de G., whose country estate joined that of the Veracs at Clamart, and was by

that elegant woman of the world presented into the *haute société* of the capital. She became at once the rage. The small coterie of whom I think I have already spoken to you, Monsieur Allard, — Armand de Laussan, de Marigny, and Grandchamps of Louisiana ; D'Aulnoy, eh, Jacques ? Chenaux, de Marsac, and myself, in particular, went mad about her, each in his own way. Allard, my friend, you doubtless imagine that you have yourself seen beautiful women — or a beautiful woman, since there can be but one to every man's lifetime ! Doubtless you have dreamed of houris, exquisite, alluring, as dangerous as fire in the blood ? But whatever your imaginings, or your dreams, they are of a poverty — *pouff !* ” — he blew away an invisible atom. “ You die, I tell you, with eyes unblessed. You never saw Gabrielle Verac ! ”

“ I have seen Noémie Carrington, her granddaughter.” The words burst unbidden from Allard's lips. He drew back, crimsoning to the roots of his hair.

The two older men exchanged covert glances. Monsieur Saint-Cyr made as though he had not heard. He was a wise man, the great avocat.

“Mademoiselle Verac,” he went on, “had many suitors. For a time de Marsac, handsome, rich, forceful, easily distanced them all; the infatuation seemed to be mutual. I still think—well, suddenly the engagement was announced of la belle Gabrielle to Armand de Laussan. Monsieur Verac gave what then seemed a strangely reluctant consent to the marriage, with the proviso that the young couple should reside in France. De Laussan certainly intended to keep to the promise thus exacted. But the gathering clouds at home, which were a prelude to your great Civil War, drew him irresistibly to the country of his birth. Soon after the birth of their child, a girl, I believe, early in 1860, if I remember aright, he returned with his family to Louisiana. Then came for his friends here a gap, unbridged save by an occasional letter to myself or another from Grandchamps or Marigny — none from de Laussan. These letters were concerned mostly with the preparations for approaching war.

“Suddenly there fell upon us news of the strange, inexplicable disappearance from her home in New Orleans of Madame Armand de Laussan.

It was, we heard at the time, a nine-days' wonder in New Orleans ; but it was silenced by the growing horror of that strife which for a time rent your country asunder. I had myself one letter from Armand ; it was written on the eve of the first great battle of that war. It is here. He makes no mention of the shadow which had darkened his hearthstone other than by saying : 'I pray for a swift and merciful bullet to my brain. I have now neither motive nor desire for life. My daughter is in safe keeping.' *Pauvre diable !* Long before this letter reached me his prayer had been granted.

"The letter placed in my hands by you, Captain Allard, furnishes, so far as I am aware, the first clue ever had to the apparently causeless desertion of her husband by Madame Armand de Laussan. Unless she herself made more explicit explanations to his family,—and it would appear that she did not,—we must read the story between the lines of this note. Pleasure-loving, spoiled, capricious, unused withal to discipline, la belle Gabrielle pined perhaps in her new home for Paris—her bright Paris !—and adulation. Who can blame her, poor child ! The astounding reve-

lation made her by Madame Verac,—it is vain at this distance of time to surmise why she made it; possibly in a fit of jealous longing for the daughter of her love; possibly from terror lest her own and her husband's past should rise up, yonder, and destroy, without warning, that daughter's future,—these taken together were enough to drive a woman like Gabrielle Verac to flight. The child? I have never been able to imagine *la belle Gabrielle* as a mother.” Monsieur Saint-Cyr's voice was tinged with a certain irritation. “For another woman to leave her child—her daughter!—exposed to the same danger which menaced herself, would certainly be incredible. For Gabrielle Verac—” he shrugged his shoulders. “But what follows is more inexplicable still. Madame Armand de Laussan came direct to Paris from Havre, after her voyage from America, and proceeded, after less than half a day in Paris, and without turning aside to visit her parents at Clamart, to Montpellier, where she was immediately received as a novice in the Convent of the Ursulines. Two years later she took the final vows. Why? Why? I have asked myself the question a thousand times.”

“De Marsac,” said D’Aulnoy sombrely, breaking silence for the first time, “fell in a duel with Justin Belcourt, two days before Madame de Laussan reached Paris.”

“Ah!” Complete silence reigned for a moment in the bureau. “Her reputed parents,” resumed the lawyer, “visited Madame de Laussan from time to time at the convent near Montpellier; and on the death of Verac, which followed that of his wife, in 1864, she came into possession of his estate. This is the story, monsieur, or as much of it as, perhaps, will ever be known.”

Allard took the papers handed him by the lawyer, with hands that trembled with the irregular bounding of his pulse. The tense strain under which he had lived since his chance meeting with Cortland, six weeks before, had kept him keyed to abnormal exaltation; the reaction left him limp and exhausted. He grasped the hands extended to him, in an ecstasy of wordless gratitude. Noémie! Noémie! he hardly refrained from shouting the name aloud. His was a joy like that of some sexless messenger from heaven, no thought of himself thrusting a moted ray into the pure light that flooded his soul.

“ Yet a moment, my friend,” said Monsieur Saint-Cyr, for Allard had seized his hat and was already at the door in his eagerness to be gone; “ *la belle Gabrielle* — ”

Allard started; he had already forgotten *la belle Gabrielle* !

“ — is still living, as you have doubtless guessed; *religieuse* in the Convent of the Ursulines at Montpellier. Her name in religion is Sister Mary of the Angels.”

“ Ah ! ” breathed Monsieur D’Aulnoy.

“ You are right, Jacques,” smiled Monsieur Saint-Cyr, answering his friend’s unspoken thought; “ it should be Venus of the Butterflies. God forgive me,” he added gravely; “ for, as a butterfly from a chrysalis-grub, so, perhaps, an angel from a butterfly ! If you desire to see her, Captain Allard — ”

“ I do desire it,” returned Allard.

“ Then, since it has been because of you that the story of her birth has been brought to light, you may not be unwilling to charge yourself with the pleasant duty of assuring Madame Armand de Laussan veuve that her blood is as free of taint as that of the proudest de Laussan in Louisiana.”

The old man's lip curled cynically as he added, "I find myself, if you will pardon me for saying so, a little apart from your extreme point of view in this matter."

Allard had recoiled at the first words with a half-uttered protest; but Monsieur Saint-Cyr continued imperturbably: "Here is a note presenting you to the Mother Superior of the Convent at Montpellier. Her permission and that of the Archbishop of the Diocese, both of whom chance to be old friends of my family, for a private interview with the nun known as *Sœur Marie des Anges*, have already been obtained."

XXI

SISTER MARY OF THE ANGELS

TWENTY-FOUR hours later Allard found himself awaiting with self-confessed trepidation the advent of the woman long buried, yet possessing in her grave, as it were, power to stir the pulses of the men about whom she had cast her spell nearly half a century earlier. He had been ushered through the tall, barred gateway, along a tree-shaded walk, and into the sunny but austere-looking reception room, by a silent portress. Madame Mère had received him with an aloof graciousness, her kindly but distant smile resembled a winter sunbeam gleaming through a wall of ice. Nothing in her manner, or in the appearance of the age-worn building within its guarded walls, hinted at the storm at that moment threatening the religious orders in France, which was shortly to sweep them out of their ancient groove of existence.

Left alone, Allard was beginning to feel the unwonted silence about him oppressive. He arose

from his chair and walked aimlessly about, half ashamed of an almost overpowering longing to escape.

“Monsieur desires to speak — with me ?”

The voice, though rich and deep, was curiously monotonous. Allard turned quickly; the mere presence of the veiled and shrouded figure standing just within the doorway struck chill to his already benumbed veins.

“Upon a family matter, madame,” he stammered, conscious that his words were awkward and commonplace.

“Monsieur is mistaken. I have no family. And no interest beyond these convent walls.” She was already turning to go.

“Nevertheless, I beg Madame Armand de Laussan to accord me a moment’s attention.”

“Monsieur is again in error. I am not Madame Armand de Laussan.”

There was neither sadness nor curiosity in the dispassionate tones. Allard shivered slightly, but hurried on as if she had not interrupted.

“And if the papers which I hold in my hand are not of interest to Madame Armand de Laussan, or to Gabrielle Verac — ”

“Gabrielle Verac !” There was sudden but momentary sharpness in the echo. “Gabrielle Verac, monsieur,”—the dry tone had returned, —“like Madame Armand de Laussan, is long dead.”

“—she will perhaps concede that they may be of importance to her descendants,” finished Allard boldly. “And particularly to the daughter of Mathilde de Laussan,” he added, with a sudden break in his voice.

“Ah ! She left a child, then, Mathilde ? To inherit the taint,” the low murmur barely reached the strained ears of her listener. “Poor creature !”

Allard felt as if he were beating against a dead wall, or battling with impalpable shadows. Her cold indifference stung him to passion.

“Madame, I entreat you. There is no taint. There never was ! See for yourself.” He thrust the papers almost roughly into the hand outstretched to repel him,—the certificates of birth and baptism of Marie Louise Gabrielle, daughter of Georges and Antoinette Dupont, and the record of the adoption of the said Marie Louise Gabrielle by Louis and Rosine Verac.

The pale fingers closed on them mechanically.

The nun walked swiftly and noiselessly to the window, swept her veil aside, and unfolded the papers one after another. At last Allard caught a glimpse of the features which lived so vividly in the memory of the great lawyer of the Rue des Capucines. They were pale as marble, even the lips once so alluringly red. But time had not touched the fine, straight eyebrows, the curling, silken lashes which swept the sunken cheeks, nor the cloud-dark eyes, violet-shaded, luminous in their deep sockets. These rested upon him enigmatically, as Sister Mary of the Angels moved again across the room and stood before him, unveiled still, strangely, mysteriously, indefinably beautiful,—far more beautiful, even now, than Noémie ; and yet—and yet—

She was speaking :—

“ I thank you, Monsieur Allard, for your good intention,” the monotony was gone from the full voice ; there rang in its stead something vaguely antagonistic. “ I should, I suppose, be filled with rapture by the discovery that I am not that thing to be abhorred, a *femme de couleur*. But I leave rapture — and gratitude — to the illustrious *famille de Laussan*,” the ashen lips were crisped

by a disdainful smile. “ For myself, monsieur, these,” — she dropped the precious records one by one upon the small table by which she stood, — “ these ravish from me, see you ! my father and my mother, and give me in return merely a cold, unvalued fact, namely, that my blood is, as they say in Louisiana, ‘ pure ; ’ and that the de Laussans have not poisoned theirs by mixing it with that of Gabrielle Verac. I loved my father, Louis Verac, quadroon, mulatto, if you will. For he was my father by everything that makes for fatherhood,—love, tenderness, care, protection, the most loyal heart and the noblest gentleman I have ever known—save one. And *he*, ah, what did he care whether there were taint in my blood or no ? He loved me ! ” The rich voice vibrated with exultation, and the stiff figure swayed, graceful as a wind-blown lily, under the sweep of feeling. “ But *he* was dead when I came back — to him, to him, you understand ? Killed defending my name from dishonor. . . . And now, you are come to tell me that they have taken away from me my father and my mother ! I cast their miserable ‘ proofs ’ back into their teeth ! Why ? ” — she whirled suddenly upon

Allard,—“why have you come so far to do a thing so cruel? By what right have you—”

“Noémie,” faltered Allard, scarcely aware of what he said, but moved by a mighty desire to clear himself from some unjust accusation; “it is for Noémie.”

“Noémie? Ah, my—my granddaughter! Yes? You love her, this Noémie?” A wave of color swept over her pale face, brightening it into still rarer loveliness. “You love her! But no, you do not love her,” she continued contemptuously; “if you loved her, what would it have mattered to you, this stigma, this pollution, which is supposed to have come down to her from Louis Verac!”

“I love her,” affirmed Allard, “so well that I have already stated to her guardian, Major Léon Grandchamps—”

“Léon, Léon Grandchamps!” breathed the nun dreamily.

“—my desire to marry Mademoiselle Noémie de Laussan Carrington, though she should prove to be in truth the lineal descendant of Louis Verac.”

She drew nearer; her eyes brooded strangely upon him. “Noémie! my—my granddaughter! She loves you, then!”

“ Alas, no, madame.”

He could never remember afterwards just what words he used in telling ; they poured from his lips unbidden, unchosen. He only knew that he had related the story in all its details ; beginning with the domiciliary visit of Butler’s Provost Guard to the hôtel de Laussan, under command of a Captain Cortland ; the last interview of the lad, Pierre de Laussan, with his mother, with the little Mathilde lying like a white flower upon the sombre cushions of the couch ; the theft of the box, with the letter written by Madame Armand de Laussan to her sister-in-law ; the intervening years which had witnessed the marriage of Richard Carrington to Mathilde de Laussan, and the death of both ; the childhood of Noémie, their daughter, under the fostering care of Madame Nemours de Laussan ; her beautiful and glowing young womanhood ; the appearance of Cortland *fils*, with all its disgraceful and disastrous consequences ; — he not only told all these things, but when he had concluded his whole soul lay bare before this woman whom, until now, he had never seen ! To the day of his death, the memory of it — and of her — will thrill

Maxime Allard, as the name of *la belle Gabrielle* continues to thrill the grizzled graybeards who once, in their far-away youth, loved her.

• • • • •

“ You will say to Laure de Laussan that Mary the Nun thanks her for the faithful fulfillment of a trust laid upon her — with little thought — by Gabrielle Verac. And you will tell Noémie — Noémie! — that the — the grandmother whom she will never behold sends a blessing upon her union with Maxime Allard.”

“ Madame! ”

“ She loves you,” said *la Sœur Marie des Anges*, with quick imperiousness ; “ have I been *la belle Gabrielle* for nothing? ”

“ And — has madame no message for Henri Saint-Cyr, and — ”

What she might have said he could never conjecture ; there was the faintest rustle of garments through the corridor without ; the tall form, which for an instant had recovered the supple and magnetic grace of *la belle Gabrielle*, stiffened, like a corpse that had been galvanized, into the rigid contours of Sister Mary of the Angels.

“*Merci, monsieur. Adieu,*” she said formally, as the portress entered. Her voice had the whispering sound of a dry leaf blown upon the wind.

XXII

THE SWORD

ONE morning—it chanced to be upon the same day that Captain Allard heard in the quiet office in the Rue des Capucines the story of Gabrielle Verac—there was enacted at the old de Laussan mansion in New Orleans a scene at once surprising and dramatic.

A hazy sunshine, mellow and soft, flooded the courtyard. Cortland, walking back and forth along the trellised rose-way with Noémie Carrington, had stopped to read the shadow on the sundial which stood in its own triangle of grassy sward near the entrance to the inner, smaller court. The batten-gate set in the brick dividing-wall stood open. The young man, glancing through, uttered an exclamation of pleased surprise. Uncle Mink, kneeling near, trowel in hand, looked up from the violet-border, and growled under his breath like an aroused watchdog. He got up to lay a withered hand upon the arm

of his young mistress, who had paused in passing.

“Step mo’ keerful, honey,” he half whispered; “rattlesnakes is crawlin’ in de grass.”

“Why, Uncle Mink!” she laughed, “you old rascal! you know there is n’t a rattler this side of Bayou St. Jean. What do you mean?” She patted his hand affectionately.

“Neb mine, Miss No-mee. Dess you do lak yo’ Unk’ Mink tell you. Step lak you was steppin’ on aiggs. I see thripple this minute!”

“Miss Carrington,” — Cortland had turned and was walking toward her, — “I realize for the first time the blue cascade whose praises you have been singing!” He indicated with a sweep of his hand the luxuriant growth of blossoming plumbago which outlined Pierre’s Terrace. “I have never seen it before from below. It is wonderful.”

“Is it not!” assented Noémie, her listless eyes brightening. “I am very jealous for the fame of that blue girdle. They tell me that beside the Queen’s Walk in the Alhambra there is a downward sweeping fall of plumbago five times as royal as mine. But of course I do not believe it.

You have never seen this gate open before?
How odd! Yes, let us go over."

She followed him across the flagged and walled square, in one corner of which stood the detached building used as a coach-house and stable. They seated themselves upon the stone bench within the loggia, as on a former occasion. How long ago it seemed to the girl, resting her head against the stuccoed wall of the house, and closing her eyes; how remote! A brown and gold glory of nasturtiums filled, as on that morning, the tall stone urns; clouds of yellow butterflies hovered over them; their faint odor mingled with the heavy perfume of Grand Duke jessamine abloom beside them. A fringe of withering sweet-alyssum bordered the inner edge of the brick flower-box, the sarcophagus where the plumbago burrowed deep its sturdy roots. A single bee droned patiently in and out, seeking if he might find somewhere a lingering drop of sweet. The stillness as of a spot far removed from everyday sounds was broken only by Uncle Mink's voice, low, rich, unctuous, rising and falling in a dolorous spiritual, which was interrupted by occasional admonitions to Old Babe, both unseen beyond the wall.

"I walks in de dew an' de dew is sweet ;

Gwine to walk to glory,

Glory !

I looks at my han's an' I looks at my feet,

(Pick up dem heels o' yo'n, Ole Babe, er I
gwine to lamm you good!)

Glory !

Walkin' in glory,

(Why n't you wrop yo' ha'r, Ole Babe ? You
good-fer-nothin' nigger ! You ain' fitten fer a
toad-frog to tromp on !)

Glory !"

How long ago that moonlighted night ! And what a senseless fool she had been not to know — this, *this*. She shivered, for Cortland's sleeve had accidentally brushed her own, and drew away, ever so slightly. The wave of physical loathing, to which she was becoming used, swept over her from head to foot ; she had almost cried out.

“ I will tell him now, this instant,” she said resolutely to herself ; “ no matter what may happen. My grandmother — *pauvre mère !* She does not, cannot, understand. I can endure it no longer. Oh, if Maxime — ”

At the unspoken name the red surged into the throat, which had become almost too thin for beauty, the silken eyelashes trembled against the marble cheek ; the palpitation of her heart made speech impossible. “ In — in — a moment,” she panted within herself, “ I — will tell him.”

He had been regarding her ; an expression of uncertainty crossed his face from moment to moment, succeeded immediately by one of exultation. Finally, as if his thought had found and met hers face to face, his square jaws tightened into hardness ; he dropped his elbows on his knees and leaned forward, idly prodding the earth in the brick box with the slender cane in his hands.

“ Mr. Cortland — ” Noémie’s manner was grave and untremulous.

“ By Jove ! ” Cortland had leaped to his feet ; he stood staring down at the flower-box with dilated eyes. “ Noémie ! Miss Carrington ! ” he said excitedly, “ you will laugh at me, I suppose, but — but a curious thought has just come to me — like a flash. May I — tell me, has any one ever — ? Stay, will you excuse me for a moment ? ”

He ran hurriedly down the terrace-steps, and disappeared into the outer court. Noémie had arisen, and remained, bewildered, where he left her. Presently he reappeared, bounding like an eager schoolboy across the intervening space, and upon the terrace. He carried Uncle Mink's garden spade in his hand ; Uncle Mink himself limped at his heels, disgust written all over his black face. Old Babe, egg-eyed, giggling, brought up the rear of the impromptu procession.

“ You will let me try, will you not ? Pardon ! ” Cortland was throwing off his coat. “ Of course it is a chance in a thousand. But — ”

“ What do you mean ? ” demanded Noémie, frowning, a slight hauteur showing in the well-known up-throw of her head.

“ Only this,” said Cortland, his voice still quivering with excitement ; “ perhaps I am but dreaming of fool’s gold. Still — *we may find the Lafayette sword !* ”

“ Where ? ” cried the girl, startled. She looked up at the balconied turret, as if the long-lost weapon might, by some magic, be suspended there.

“ Here. Here, in the flower-box. You have

said yourself that it remains just as it was then, when Pierre de Laussan, your uncle, went away. Except for the replanting of roots and seeds, the earth may never have been touched. And see, the box is more than four feet deep; the sword could lie far below the roots! You know it was here that Pierre waited for Hercule."

He spoke rapidly, breathlessly, running his palm up and down the handle of the spade.

Noémie's clasped hands were pressed against her heart. She had instant conviction that the long quest was ended; that the ardently desired moment had come, when the past would yield up its secret. And in place of the rapturous delight which she had imagined herself feeling at such a moment, despair clutched at her heart!

"Snakes is crawlin' in de grass," muttered Uncle Mink, standing at her elbow; "I feels it."

A low whistle escaped the pursed lips of Old Babe, hunched upon the railing.

Cortland, oblivious of these cross-gales, kept his eyes fixed upon Noémie's face. An almost imperceptible movement of the head finally rewarded his gaze. The girl dropped nerveless upon the bench, but her frightened, fascinated

eyes remained set upon the alien, the outsider, whose muscular arms drove the spade lower and lower into the packed loam of the box ; turning the clods this way and that with deliberate haste ; getting, she felt it, nearer and nearer to that treasure which her own people for two generations — which Maxime ! — had sought in vain.

The uprooted alyssum dropped out upon the terrace floor ; the droning bee hid himself among the shaken branches of the plumbago, dragged out in its turn and laid aside ; the pile of rich, black earth grew higher ; the girl's heart beat more quickly ; now with an infusion of hope. It surely was not there !

Cortland threw down the spade and seated himself, panting a little, on the bench beside her. He laughed ruefully, showing the well-nigh blistered palms of his large, handsome hands. "Fool's gold !" he admitted, in a tone of deep dejection ; "I wonder if you will ever forgive me ! At least, I trust the plumbago roots are uninjured. I will reset them at once. If your blue girdle should suffer—"

"Oh," cried Noémie, smiling, one would have said gratefully, "do not think of that. It was

worth trying for. We would never have been satisfied if we had not tried.” *We!* She could afford to be magnanimous! She breathed a prayer of thankfulness, as for a great danger overpast.

“Well!” — he got to his feet, this time slowly, — “let us repair the ravages.” He threw a spadeful of earth into the box.

“Don’t,” said Noémie; “Uncle Mink will — ”

“One more try,” muttered Cortland half aloud. He pushed the spade in, leaning far over the box. Noémie heard a faint grating; the bottom!

“Ah!” Cortland’s voice seemed to echo up as from a well; his head and shoulders were dipped forward into the excavation he had made. He had laid the spade aside and was digging with his hands.

He laid the ancient sword upon the table in the library, and stepped back with that air of anxious deference, long discarded when alone with Madame de Laussan. The damp loam still clung to the scabbard and belt-buckle, both encrusted with rust. The silver and gold mountings were tarnished almost to blackness. Only

the great jewel, set in the scroll-work of the hilt, flashed in the softened light of the room like a flaming eye, untouched by mould, or rust, or time.

Madame de Laussan, sitting in her high-backed chair drawn up near the table, looked long — her brain teeming with God knows what memories! — at the familiar and unforgotten heirloom. A fluttering sigh, exhaled from her blanched lips, gave the only sign that life stirred within her. Her cold grasp tightened upon Noémie's hand nestled in her own ; but without a glance at the young face, as set as hers, she bent her head in token of acceptance.

“The Quest is ended — Noémie ?” His utterance was shaken by an emotion more unmixed with selfishness than any he had ever known. For the moment all egotism, every mean consideration, was swept out of sight. A strange humility softened his features ; he extended his hand, which trembled, toward the girl ; hers, slowly outreached, met his above the recovered sword, and lay passively in the blistered palm.

She had accepted Fate.

XXIII

OLD BABE

FOR a month and more there had been a rare flutter throughout the *Vieux Carré* and the *Quartier Américain* of New Orleans. Snatches of eighteenth-century music, thin, sweet, aerial, were whistled on street-corners, strummed on guitar and piano, “patted” by gamins along the banquettes ; more coherent strains floated out into the night from salon and boudoir, where belles and beaux were rehearsing *menuet* and *gavotte* to be danced by chosen groups at the Great Centennial Ball in preparation for the eighteenth of December, the ball commemorating the transfer of the Province of Louisiana from France to the United States one hundred years before, 1803.

Old prints and dog-eared “Books of Costumes,” dragged from their hiding-places, or disgorged by the reluctant Petitpain, were spread upon tables for the better convenience of the eager

young heads clustered above them ; fresh young voices discussed, amid shrieks of laughter, the shocking scantiness and the absurd prettiness of the Directoire gown ; slim young fingers sketched outlines of Empire corsage, or Colonial scarf ; young tresses were “tried” in impossible coiffures ; from ancient closets and time-polished cedar-chests came forth great-great grandmamma’s flowered brocade, stiff enough to stand alone (as if that were a virtue, sniffed my Lady Disdain), her lace handkerchief, yellow, smelling of dried rose leaves, her red-heeled satin slippers, frayed at the toes with much dancing, the high-backed comb presented by the handsome Spanish Governor-General Galvez to papa’s great-great-great grande cousin ; the dangling earrings worn by an ancestress at one of the Marquis de Vaudreuil’s famous routs ; the Watteau fan carried by the wife of the first American Governor ; the body-waist of a French Commandant’s Virginian bride.

The dead-and-gone belles who wore these narrow slips, danced in these buckled slippers, flirted with these fans of a bygone day,—surely they would have turned in their oven-vaults in the Cimetière St. Louis could they have beheld their

graceless descendants overhauling, with flippant giggles and contemptuous flouts, their cherished finery! Yet more surely still would they have settled back into their places with satisfied smiles, seeing how bewitching those same descendants were, tricked out in their own treasured gear!

Noémie Carrington, by virtue of her direct descent from Antoine de Laussan and from Raoul Destrehan,—that Castor-and-Pollux pair who came over from France when the Province was young, and who left behind them a fiery record made up of adventures in love and war,—was included in the list of dancers of the gavotte. She found in the rehearsals, and in the eager search after correct costumes, an escape from Cortland's irritating presence. The poor child felt—Quixotic as this may seem—bound by honor to the finder of the lost sword, whom curious destiny, passing over all others, had decreed should be Cortland. The engagement was still a family secret. “No, not until the day after the ball,” she said decisively, at each of those constrained and almost wholly silent daily interviews with her lover, when he urged a public announcement. Upon

this Major Grandchamps also insisted, though unaware of the girl's real feelings.

Madame de Laussan had taken to her own apartment the day the Lafayette sword, cleansed of mould and purged of rust, had been restored to its place above the library mantel; the day Cortland, in the short regulation interview with her, had said at parting: "I have her at last. Mine! Mine! And let me warn you, once for all, madame, the least symptom of drawing back on your part or hers — *the letter!*"

"At least he will keep silent now, for his wife's sake," she whispered over and over again to Sirène. "Oh, but certainly, 'Tite Maîtresse," the mulattress invariably replied; and as invariably added between her teeth, "*Coquin!* he is capable of telling all to the first comer. May the bones rot in his body! for 'Sieur Maxime is surely dead."

"I wish I might stay at home with you, *ma mère*," sobbed Noémie, the night of the ball, on her knees beside Madame de Laussan's couch, her bright young head prone on the older woman's breast. "If I could only die — before to-morrow! I hate him so, *ma mère*, I hate him so! Why must I marry a man I hate? Surely God

will forgive us both if we break that foolish oath."

Madame de Laussan started ; she had in truth forgotten the oath — long ago ! — nor had she fairly realized until this moment that Noémie was unaware of her own powerful reason for allowing the marriage. "*Pauvre enfant,*" she murmured, drawing the girl closer within her arms. She lifted despairing eyes to Sirène standing at the foot of the couch. "Shall I tell her the truth ?" the eyes mutely questioned. "Shall I kill one horror with another ? Shall I ?" "No, no. Not now, 'Tite Maîtresse," Sirène's blazing eyes returned.

"*Mon trésor,* my cherished," — the old voice was heart-breakingly tender, — "go now ; it is time to dress. Make thyself beautiful, *mon bébé.*"

"For the last time," — Noémie bent over to caress the fevered cheek, — "I will, *ma mère.* As for to-morrow — "

The artificial gayety of her manner was underlaid with something like defiance. The two women looked after her apprehensively as she left the room.

"I will tell her to-morrow," declared Madame de Laussan slowly.

“ You will *not* tell her,” stormed Sirène ; “ it is not true, ’Tite Maîtresse ; Madame Gabrielle lied ! Is it that you wish to murder her, our *bébé* ! Me, I will not permit it. The *cocodril* ! the dog ! Pardon, my angel, my mistress ! pardon.” She dropped to the floor, and drew the bare feet of her mistress against her forehead in token of submission.

“ I will tell her to-morrow,” repeated Madame de Laussan.

The maid, whose deft fingers had been busy about the radiant figure standing in front of the cheval-glass, drew back for a last critical survey of her young mistress, then retired with a deep sigh of content. It wanted yet a half hour to the time set for the arrival of Madame and Mademoiselle Berthet with the carriage. Noémie sank listlessly into a chair, clasping her knee with her ungloved hands, and gazing abstractedly into the smouldering embers in the fireplace.

Old Babe, permitted to assist at the toilette, crouched at her feet, caressing with brown, velvety fingers the slender ankles in their silken gear.

“ Miss No-mee, you sho’ do beat de Queen o’

Rex! D' ain't nobody kin tech you." The small handmaid nodded an ecstatic head.

Noémie was indeed beautiful, despite the now habitual pallor of her cheeks, and the sadness which circled her starry eyes with violet rings. The short-waisted gown of satin brocade, which clung so closely to her slight form, was the tint of old ivory from age; so was the fall of priceless lace upon the low corsage, and the quaintly-puffed short sleeves; a jeweled clasp, which once adorned the waist of a queen of France, drew into place the broad rose-colored sash; the glittering buckles, mementos of the same hapless queen, shone on her red-heeled dancing-shoes. The de Laussan diamonds sparkled in the up-piled puffs and curls of her coiffure; the milk-white Destrehan pearls melted into the whiter neck and arms.

"Reckin you gwine to dance dat Virginny-reel wi' Mist' Cotelan', ain't you, Miss No-mee?" Old Babe rounded her lips enigmatically.

"No, Old Babe," returned her mistress absently.

"*Hmp!* He 's plum pi'zen, dat Mist' Cotelan'." Noémie, gazing into the coals, made no reply.

Old Babe, unabashed, presently resumed her inquiries. "Huccum Mist' Cotelan' to mek sech a 'miration 'bout findin' dat swode tether day, when he done bury it dar hisse'f?"

"What are you saying, Old Babe?" demanded Noémie, frowning, as if the words had fallen on ears but half open.

"I say, what *mek* dat white man 'ten' lak he ain' nuver seed dat swode, when he done dug it inter dat flower-box hisse'f?"

"What!" Noémie sat up, suddenly electrified. "Are you crazy, Old Babe? What do you mean?"

"No 'm. I ain' crazy. An' I ain' lyin'," said Old Babe with dignity. "An' I knows what I'm a-sayin'. Caze, *I seen him do it!*"

"You—what?"

"Wi' dese here two eyes. I seen him, yas 'm."

"Old Babe, tell me at once, what—"

"Yas'm, fo' Gawd, I gwine to tell de trut'! Hit 's thes this-a-way, Miss No-mee. I wuz quoiled up under de eedge of de billium-room winder,—on de outside,—tether night. I wan't in no mis-cheef, Miss No-mee. I wuz thes hidin' out fum daddy, caze daddy—"

“ Old Babe, if you don’t tell me what you know, I will call Uncle Mink this minute,” cried Noémie, exasperated. “ Go on !”

“ Yas’m ; I wuz thes quoiled up under de billium-room winder, thes lookin’ thoo a teenchy-weenchy crack — it wuz dat night you went somers wi’ Miss Jeanne an Mars Félix, you ’member ?”

“ Yes, yes. Go on !”

“ An’ I seed Mist’ Cotelan’, a’ter a while, come prancin’, biggaty, lak he *do* prance, inter de billium-room, totin’ a bungle. He done onwrop de bungle an’ ‘t wan’t no mo’ ‘n some o’ dem sticks you-all knocks billium-balls wi’. But dey wuz somep’n wrop’ up inside ‘em. An’ *hit* wuz a *swode*. Cross my heart, swar to God hit wuz a *swode*—dat same rusty *swode* what Mist’ Cotelan’ dug up out’n de flower-box. Caze he look’ all eroun’, Mist’ Cotelan’ did ; den he went out’n de do’ todes de te’ace. I done jump down fum dat winder an’ lickety-split eroun’ de house. I had to climb de wall.” Old Babe paused to give a reminiscent chuckle. “ Hit wuz dark ez pitch. Seem-lak Mist’ Cotelan’ must ha’ loose-up de dirt in dat box befo’, caze it did n’t tek him so mighty-long lak it did tether day. I watched him. Yas’m. An’

I seed him bury dat swode. He done shevel back de dirt, an' drap down on his knees to scrape up de crumbs. Den he done pat down de yearth in de box, *pat, pat, pat!* I reckin he sot dem sweep-erlissiums back. I know he did n't 'sturb de lum-bagos. He didn't say nothin', jes grunt onct in a while. Reckin' 't wuz hard work fer a genterman. *Hmp!* 'Reckly he come down to de hydrum an' wash his han's. I wuz hidin' behine de big water-jar. Den he toted de spade an' shevel out to de coach-house. I heered him 'hine de cayage breshin' his clo's an' laughin' to hisse'f. 'Reckly he come out, dodgin' along de wall, twell he got to de te'ace agin. He look' down on de flower-box, lak he wuz studyin' some mo' devilment; an' den he went back into de Gret House. I run back, lickety-split, an' quoiled under de billium-room winder. I reckin I mus' ha' went to sleep, caze when I done peep, you wuz in de billium-room long o' Mist' Cotelan'. I could n' hear nothin', but I spec dat buckra-man done tole you dat he been settin' dar all ebenin' waitin' fer you, ontwel seem-lak you wuz ez long er-comin'ez de Day o' Jedgment. Ain't it, Miss No-mee ? "

Noemie had leaped to her feet; her eyes shot

sparkles, her white bosom heaved. "Old Babe," — she stooped until she brought her scarlet cheek close against the child's black one; she spoke slowly, almost sternly, — "listen, Old Babe. Do you know what happens to people when they do not tell the truth?"

"Me? Oh, yas'm," returned Old Babe complacently; "Gawd A'mighty strikes 'em bline; an' ole black Satan shivels 'em up."

"You saw Mr. Cortland take a sword out of a bundle of billiard-cues?"

"Sticks? Yas, Miss No-mee."

"And you saw him dig a hole in the flower-box on Pierre's Terrace, and put that sword in the hole, and cover it over?"

"Yas'm, Miss No-mee, I wuz quoiled up under de billium-winder. I seed him dig dat hole an' bury dat swode. I wuz scrooch-up behine de big water-jar. Fo' Gawd, I ain' lyin', Miss No-mee."

"I believe you, Old Babe. But you must not tell anybody else, understand? You are a good girl, Old Babe," — she had scurried across the room and was rummaging in the drawers of her dressing-table, — "here's a sash-ribbon for you, Old Babe, and some stockings, silk, Old Babe,

and a silver thimble, and some beads, and a fan with only one stick broken, and yes! a gold ring." She tossed these articles one by one to Old Babe, whose face, for ecstatic joy, fairly matched her own.

"Yes, Félide, I am coming,"—for the maid at the door was announcing the carriage. "Good-night, Old Babe, the False Prince will be riding away to-morrow; and the True Prince—the True Prince, Old Babe—"

"Yas'm, Miss No-mee," said Old Babe, bewildered, but showing her teeth in an appreciative grin.

Noémie flew down the stairs on light feet—the same stairs, the same feet, which, two hours before, were so toilsome the one, and so leaden the other. She was humming "Colinette à la Cour" as she approached Madame de Laussan's bedside.

"Why, Noémie! Why, my adored!" Madame de Laussan raised herself on her elbow to stare at this embodiment of youth, hope, loveliness, gayety.

"Will I do, *ma mère?*" cried the girl, whirling her scant skirts into a "cheese," and sinking

demurely to the floor. “Will the shades of the de Laussan and the Destrehan be content?” The echoes of her laughter ran like sprites about the dimly-lit bedchamber.

“I think she is going mad!” whispered Sirène, awestruck, when the door had closed and the strains of “Colinette à la Cour” came back, muffled but spirited, from the stair.

Madame de Laussan covered her face with her hands. “The night before her execution,” she quoted softly from a family chronicle, “the young Marquise de Laussan danced in a gavotte in the prison of the Conciergerie. The Comte de G. records that her innocent gayety was as unrestrained as if the morrow were to dawn upon her *fiançailles*.”

XXIV

THE GAVOTTE

NEW ORLEANS, on the night of the eighteenth of December, nineteen hundred and three, was *en fête*. From the upper tip of her crescent, resting upon the sodded levee at Southport, to the lower horn which nestles amid the magnolias of Jackson Barracks, a dazzling procession of electric lights threw a clear radiance upward to the sky, and showered silver mist into the Mississippi ; the warships, French, Spanish, and American, riding at anchor in mid-stream, were outlined in fire whose broken reflection turned the water below to a restless tossing of molten gold ; the streets, gay with the flags of three nations, were a network of shining roadways, all leading in the direction of the French Opera House in Rue Bourbon, the centre, as it were the heart, of this Thousand and Second Night. Here carriages, an endless succession, were arriving, pausing to discharge their occupants, hurrying

on to give place. The great double entrance stairway swarmed with ascending guests; the narrow banquettes, the projecting balconies, the sloping roofs around, were packed with humanity, noisy, good-humored, ejaculating humanity. Within the vast amphitheatre—proscenium boxes, loges découvertes, loges grillées, baignoires, bancs—was equally packed with humanity; but silken-clad, jeweled, starred: stately women and slender maids, beautiful in carefully considered toilettes; men in evening-dress; naval and military officers in full uniform; ambassadors, foreign representatives; state and city dignitaries, glittering with gold lace.

The parquet and orchestra, floored over for dancing, were lighted by varicolored globes strung jewel-like from the vaulted ceiling. A rose-garlanded dais encircling the immense stage made a fit throne for half a hundred patched and powdered *grandes dames* in the court-dress of Louis XV and the Empire, and the simpler but no less effective costume of the American Revolution. A band, screened by palms whose fronds towed up into the flies, preluded the ball with old-time airs: “Les fêtes d’Hebé;” “Armide;” “La Chasse du jeune Henri.”

Madame Berthet's carriage had driven to the stage entrance in Rue Toulouse. Preceded by Jeanne, jeweled and scarfed for the minuet, and by Noémie, scarfed and jeweled for the gavotte, Madame Berthet climbed the tortuous stair which gives access to that mysterious region known as "behind the scenes."

Noémie paused on the threshold of the mirrored greenroom to gaze with entranced eyes at the bewildering panorama within.

"A leaf from 'Youth's sweet-scented Manuscript,'" suggested Strang, at her elbow. "How dare mere man, with but a band of blue silk across his conventional shirt-front to mark him as one of the Elect, venture into such a kaleidoscope of loveliness? Methinks only an immortal in the shining panoply of Heaven were worthy."

"Mere man, in this case," replied Noémie, surveying him gravely, "ought to be ashamed of himself for declining the trouble of laced coat and knee-breeches."

"That may not have been the reason — with some of us shrunk-shanks," grimaced Donald; "but you, *mademoiselle la jeunesse*," — he bent

gallantly over her hand,—“you are the most golden letter on the aforesaid leaf.”

She passed on, greeted with an admiring chorus from the waiting dancers flashing excitedly about the long room, laughing, babbling compliments, practicing glide and curtsy, turning one another about with shrill cries of astonished recognition.

“What has come over her?” mused Strang, watching her from the doorway. “Has the Changeling who has usurped the castle for so long been withdrawn? and has the rightful Princess been restored to her own?”

Noémie, as if answering his unspoken thought, looked over at him and smiled. She stood against one of those mildewed mirrors before which generations of *danseuses* have bounded and pirouetted, and *falcons* and *chanteuses légères* have settled jewel and plume before “going on.” She radiated gladness upon the group gathered about her. At the back of her brain, beyond the badinage and repartee of the moment, there was music to which the heart danced. “*I am free,*” the strain went; “*I am no longer bound.* *It is as if neither my grandmother nor myself had taken an oath.* *And if she has ever had*

other reasons” — here the melody was a trifle jarred — “*for wishing me to marry him, she will not wish it when she knows what I know.*” So, the strain swung once more with rhythm. “*And if — if Maxime —*”

The minuet-dancers had filed with slow and graceful step, half an hour earlier, through the wings, out upon the dancing-floor. The loud bursts of applause, mingled with the measured movement of the minuet from Mozart’s “*Don Juan*,” had been drifting into the greenroom. Now the flushed performers were stepping back in rhythmic line ; the gavotte was forming.

“One familiar with the history of our old town,” one of the brocaded grandes dames was explaining to a foreign ambassador who stood beside her in the greenroom, where her word was law, watching with pleased eyes the animated scene before them, “would find among the two hundred young men and women, participants in these dances, many names familiar to its early records, social, military, and political ; the Delery, Grima, Castellanos, Villeré, Fortier, Beau-regard, Claiborne, de Laussan — Ah, pardon ! I am forgetting a duty !” She flitted away, cast-

ing anxious and nervous glances to right and left.

Noémie looked about her, also with questioning eyes, aware for the first time that Jules Lestrappes, her own partner, had not presented himself.

“Miss Carrington,” — the grande dame was genuinely distressed, — “your dancing-partner, Mr. Lestrappes, is unable to be present to-night. He has been called away by the serious illness of his father. I have not told you before, because — Ah, here he comes!” she broke off, relieved. “I was really afraid you had forgotten your pledge, Major Grandchamps.”

“Madame, a pledge to Beauty could never be forgotten — by me.” Major Grandchamps used his courtliest tone, as he bent to brush her jeweled fingers with his moustached lips.

Noémie, at the sound of his voice, had started eagerly forward; she shrank hastily back, to stand with parted lips, alternately reddening and paling; unable, after the first glance, to lift her coward eyelids. Was it a dream? Could she have imagined the tall, supple form making its way in and out, through the slowly moving file of the gavotte? Her uncle’s quiet, highbred voice

fell upon her agitated senses : “Noémie, my dear, I bring the regrets of young Lestrappes, who, as you doubtless know already, cannot be here this evening. I also bring you a partner for the gavotte, whom I trust you will find an agreeable substitute. Miss Carrington, Captain Allard, of the United States Army, my godson.”

Noémie put out her hand mechanically ; at the firm, muscular grasp of the soldier’s hand uncertainty vanished. She raised her eyes confidently — to drop them again before the ardent questioning in his.

As in a dream, she took her place beside him, for “La Fête du Village” was sending its sprightly call from the musician’s bower, and stepped out from the shelter of the wings into the full blaze of light beyond. As in a dream, she made with him the circuit of the immense dancing-floor ; pausing to bend low before the Grandes Dames on the garlanded dais. The pretty dance, with its staccato movement and rhythmic interludes, had fairly begun before either of the pair found speech.

“You will forgive my awkwardness, Miss Carrington,” Allard said in the first pause. “I learned something like the gavotte when I was

a little chap," — the exigencies of the dance whirled them apart. — " Do you remember Brocard's *Académie de Danse*, where you and I and Jeanne Berthet" — another momentary separation cut his reminiscences short.

" When did you return from France? " Noémie questioned.

" This morning, by way of New York. I have not reported, yet, at the Barracks. I have been practicing — gavotting — all day," he explained from time to time, during the brief intervals of waiting a turn. " With Jeanne — Madame Berthet at the piano — l'oncle Grandchamps looking on, jeering and encouraging — There! I have made another blunder. Have I put you out? — Sorry for old Lestrappes, *parole d'honneur* — But I may be permitted to bless the Fates, *n'est-ce pas?* "

" A handsome pair that! " commented more than one spectator; " how beautifully they take the spirited step together! "

" As I live, Noémie Carrington and Maxime Allard! Has the Southern Confederacy then buried the hatchet? Or has Major Grandchamps gone blind! "

“What has become of the dark-browed Cortland, I wonder.”

“Yonder he is, looking down at her, impulsive, as usual. They say he has turned Catholic for the bright eyes of Noémie. I hear he is three times millionaire.”

“Ah! If he has changed religion, it is more likely that the de Laussan diamonds were the awakening light.”

“She has them on. See! And those wonderful Destrehan pearls.”

The gavotte had come to an end, upon a clear, abrupt note. It was being enthusiastically encored.

“You are beautiful as a vision,” whispered Allard, catching the step now as if by instinct.

“Doubtless you saw many beautiful women in Paris,” remarked Noémie, smiling over her shoulder, as she floated away, light as a bit of thistledown.

“Not one. Did — did you miss me a little — Noémie?”

“Yes, Maxime,” under cover of the renewed clapping of hands.

He took leave of her at the entrance to the

greenroom. "My leave expires at midnight," he said; "and I have some reports to file. I am to have an interview with Madame de Laussan tomorrow at noon. May I — see you, after?"

Again the simple "yes" thrilled his ear.

It had not occurred to Noémie to ask how it had come about that Major Grandchamps had taken again into his favor the lately detested wearer of the United States Army uniform, or by what strange chance Allard had been practicing the gavotte in l'oncle Grandchamps's own apartment, with Jeanne Berthet for a teacher, and Madame Berthet at the piano! It did not occur to her, now, to wonder why Allard should be pledged to an interview with Madame de Laussan on the morrow. She was in that exalted state of mind and heart when miracles are accepted without question. The only thing that really mattered was the fact of Allard's presence.

"To-morrow! at last, my Noémie!" said a low voice in her ear, as she stood, later, in a baignoire, looking at the brilliant scene. She turned quickly to face Cortland. If he had felt anger or jealousy at the sight of Allard, his manner betrayed neither. He smiled, drawing

her hand within his arm. It was the smile which made the girl shudder without knowing why ; the smile that drew his lips away from his teeth, when his eyelids were narrowed, and a greenish light played between the heavy lashes.

“ Come to-morrow, at eleven o’clock,” she said quietly, withdrawing her hand from his arm. “ I wish to see you particularly. No, I shall not dance any more to-night. We are going home immediately. Good-night.”

She was turning away. The band was playing very softly “ Pauv’ petti Mam’selle Zi-Zi,” the ancient Creole chanson. A sudden pang of pity moved her to hold out the hand which she had taken from his arm. “ Good-night,” she repeated gently. “ Good-by.”

“ Good-night. To-morrow ! ” he whispered, openly triumphant.

XXV

THE RECKONING

THE next morning, at the appointed hour, Cortland found Miss Carrington in her own boudoir ; a small, daintily-furnished room separated from the library by heavy portières only. She arose to meet him as he entered. He could see that she was trembling, though he could not guess that it was from the terror of the interview before her, or that the words which she had rehearsed over and over again within herself seemed fading from her mind, leaving there only blank horror of himself.

Cortland mistook her emotion ; he advanced with arms extended, eyes gleaming, cheeks purple. “ Noémie ! At last ! Mine ! Mine ! ”

She shrank back. “ Do not touch me ! ” she commanded ; “ how dare you look at me in that way ! In any way ! ” Her eyes blazed anger upon him.

“ Why, what do you mean ? ” he stammered, genuinely astonished.

“ What do I mean ! Will you come with me a moment ? ” She swept aside the curtains and led the way into the library. “ Would it not be well, Mr. Cortland, for you to take your property ? ”

She flashed a contemptuous glance from his amazed face to the sword beneath her mother’s portrait. “ After the pains you took to get the sword properly tricked out, rusted, buried, and dug up again, it is surely of some value to you. It is, as you may imagine, worthless to us.”

He listened at first with an uncomprehending frown, but before she had finished, his brow cleared ; he burst into a loud, relieved laugh. “ So that is what has provoked you, Noémie. I really don’t wonder much. How ever did you find me out ? Good joke, was n’t it ! Even the wonderful major was taken in. Gad, when I think of that absurd old windbag, I am ready to split ! ” He laughed again with retrospective enjoyment.

“ It may be a good joke to you, Mr. Cortland,” said Noémie, half-bewildered and wholly angered by his careless acceptance of the charge ; “ but it does not appeal to me. Neither, I think, will it appeal to my uncle and my grandmother.”

He stared at her, incredulous.

“I have only to add”—she drew herself up haughtily—“that everything—everything is at an end between us.”

“You do not mean it,” he said dully; “you cannot mean it.”

“I do mean it!”

“By God!” he broke in roughly. “You think you can play fast and loose with me, Miss Noémie Carrington! Very well, I will show you whether you can or not. Our engagement will be announced this day, according to your promise, or I will know the reason why. The engagement, and the date of the wedding.” Again the coarsened voice, the hardening of the handsome face into brutality.

“I will tell you the reason why now,” returned Noémie coolly. “The reason is that I do not love you. I have never loved you. I would rather die than become your wife. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” he laughed viciously; “quite clear, quite convincing. And—the reason for your reason, Miss de Laussan Carrington, is not far to seek. It was present in the person of Captain Maxime Allard last night at the ball. Am I correct?”

“Yes. You are correct,” said Noémie boldly; “since you insist upon knowing, quite correct.”

This confession destroyed the last remnant of the man’s self-control. He crossed over to where she stood and thrust his face into hers. “Allard, Maxime Allard,” he sneered, “the acknowledged lover of a common dancing-girl. The coward who ran off to Europe rather than face the scandal following such a connection!”

“It is false!” interrupted Noémie hotly. “It was you — you who started that falsehood. I know it now, though not from him. Besides, I would not believe you against him though you swore a thousand oaths.”

“You love him, then,” said Cortland, with sudden and unexpected calm.

“Yes, I love him!” cried the girl, carried out of herself by the derision in his eyes and on his lips. “I love him so well, that —”

The words died in her throat. Cortland had caught her wrist in his powerful grasp.

“You! You! And do you think that by throwing me over you can get Maxime Allard, Captain Maxime Allard, for a husband? Well, I tell you, you are mistaken, my fine Mademoiselle

de Laussan Carrington. I suppose that you think that you know who you are?"

Struggling in his hold, she lifted her head proudly and opened her lips.

"You think," he went on, in a low, concentrated voice, "that you belong to the blue blood of the aristocracy, hey? Don't you? Well, maybe you've got the blue blood in you. But it has n't washed out the black blood. It never can."

"Let me go, sir," cried Noémie, terrified. "What do you mean?"

"Aha, it's your turn to want to know what *I* mean! I mean that you may trace your descent from all the de Laussans, and all the Destrehans, and all the Carringtons, you can scrape together, but all the same, you are bound to trace it also from Louis Jasmin (afterward Verac), free man of color, and Rosine Rabut, his wife, a negro slave. Ha! Ha! How do you like that, mademoiselle?"

He released her wrist so suddenly that she staggered back and would have fallen but for an armchair upon which she leaned, wide-eyed and panting.

"It is false, false," she whispered; "false as you are."

"Not so fast, my lady," — he relapsed into a cool, off-hand, conversational tone. "You can ask Madame de Laussan. She knows. So does that yellow devil, Sirène. Perhaps others. So will Maxime Allard, for I mean to find him at once and tell him. A pretty show you'll make with any white man, when the truth comes out."

Noémie had lost the power of speech. She continued to look at him, horror growing in her strained eyes, her lips pinching, her face drawn and ghastly white.

Cortland's eyes gloated over her misery. "How do I know this?" he continued, as if she had spoken. "I am going to tell you how I know it."

Facing her, where one year before he had faced Madame de Laussan, he told the story as he had told it then, dwelling on his father's part therein with savage prolixity; describing the stolen casket and its contents; quoting Gabrielle Verac's letter with unctuous deliberation, rehearsing his first and later interviews with Madame de Laussan, lingering with shameless gratification on the uses to which he had put the money extorted from the terror-stricken woman.

“Many a bunch of American Beauties you got out of that first payment,” he laughed, in conclusion. “Now that you know the truth, you will doubtless realize that, so far from Miss Carrington’s stooping to mix her blue blood with that of a poor white, the poor white was going down into the mud to pick up a — nigger !”

“Oh !” The smothered shriek was like the death cry of a wounded animal. It sobered Cortland’s insane rage.

“I didn’t mean that,” he hastened to say in a more temperate voice. “I do love you, Noémie. I swear I do. I was driven into telling you the truth by your treatment of me. I never meant you to know. Come. I’ll marry you to-morrow, and no one else shall ever know.”

“Go.” She stood up, tall and straight, fire flaming her eyes, her mouth set and determined. “Leave the house this instant, or I will have you put out of it.”

“Very well,” he mocked, turning on his heel. “Exit Cortland, with a certain letter in his pocket which will make fine reading for a certain captain in the United States Army.”

“Go !” she repeated imperiously. “Do what-

ever you like, only rid this house of your presence.”

He walked jauntily to the door, as he had done on former occasions. But once outside, he paused as before to wipe the perspiration from his forehead. “D—n fool you ’ve made of yourself again, Sid Cortland,” he muttered; “why must I show my cards whenever I get into that confounded library? Gad, but the little Spitfire was pretty as a picture! Blaze away, my beauty, if it does you any good. You ’ll sing another tune after you have seen that precious grandmother of yours! Eh, what?”

A man-servant had approached, unheard, and was standing in a respectful attitude before him. “Madame de Laussan,” he repeated, “begs monsieur to come for a moment to her sitting-room before leaving.”

Cortland followed him up the stair, a fatuous smile dawning into his face. “I can manage Grandmamma fast enough,” he boasted to himself; “and Grandmamma must manage Spitfire, or it will go hard with ’em both. Sidney, my boy, the game is yours.”

Madame de Laussan was half reclining in a

chaise-lounge drawn up by an open fire. She was carefully dressed, and there was something in her appearance which arrested Cortland on the threshold. She seemed by some miracle to have regained, if not her physical, at least her spiritual strength ; her dark eyes looked out from their deep sockets with their old-time brilliancy ; her wasted cheeks had taken on a tinge of color. She was not alone ; *Sirène*, as usual, was stationed at her elbow ; Major Grandchamps sat, well-groomed, elegant, in correct morning costume, beside her ; Captain Allard stood on the opposite side of the fireplace, leaning against the mantel.

Cortland flushed a little upon perceiving the two men, but returned their formal greeting with a careless nod. He approached Madame de Laussan with an insinuating, deferential smile, but Major Grandchamps, who had arisen, lifted a detaining hand. "One moment, if you please, Mr. Cortland."

"I believe," said Cortland quietly, "that Madame de Laussan has done me the honor to send for me."

"She has," returned Major Grandchamps. "It is for her, and in her name that I speak when I

desire you to listen to the reading of a letter, whose contents, however, are already familiar to you. Maxime — ”

Allard made a step or two forward, and placed in the hand of the older man a yellowed document with crumbled seal. Major Grandchamps unfolded it with deliberation. “ This letter — ” he began.

“ Ah ! ” ejaculated Cortland, taken aback ; but, his effrontery returning, “ So ! ” he sneered, “ the stolen letter ! Captain Maxime Allard, then, was the thief ! ”

“ A hard term, Mr. Cortland,” smiled Allard ; “ though I confess I should not have hesitated to take the letter by force or by strategy, had it been necessary. As it was, I merely picked it up from the sidewalk, where you left it lying, on a certain night not over-long ago, after having verified in yourself the adage *in vino veritas*. Possibly you may remember ? ”

Cortland’s ready tongue for once failed him ; he remained sullenly silent. Major Grandchamps turned to his kinswoman. “ You will pardon me, my dear Laure,” he said, “ if once more I awaken unhappy memories by reading the letter of Madame Armand de Laussan ? It is necessary.”

He read the letter written by Gabrielle Verac on the eve of her flight slowly and carefully to the end, then, striking a match, he held the thin pages over the flame and watched them shrivel and curl into a bluish ash, which hovered for a moment in the air and floated slowly to the floor.

Cortland's eyes followed the zigzag fall. "It is easy enough to destroy a stolen letter—a twice-stolen letter, if you will!"—he bowed in mock deference,—“but even Major Grandchamps has not the power to destroy facts.”

“For example?”

“For example, the fact that Louis Jasmin, the father of Madame Armand de Laussan—you will observe, gentlemen, that I have the family history at my finger-ends—was a free man of color, as they said in his day; and that Rosine Rabut, her mother, was not only a negress, but an ex-slave.”

“We have no intention, Mr. Cortland,” said the major, with suave courtesy, “of denying any fact or facts in the case. You have stated, with absolute accuracy, the condition of Louis Jasmin—afterward Verac—and of Rosine Rabut, his wife.”

“ Ah ! then — ”

“ Wait a moment. But a fact of which you perhaps are unaware is that Madame Armand de Laussan was the *adopted* daughter only of Louis Jasmin, afterward Verac, and of his wife, Rosine Rabut.”

Cortland laughed incredulously. “ A very pretty story, major,” he said ; “ a romantic story, indeed.”

“ You will retract the insinuation which your words and your tones hint at, sir, or you will fight,” cried the major, on fire at once.

“ I think,” interposed Allard quietly, “ that Mr. Cortland will gladly retract the implied insult when he has examined these attested papers, which I myself obtained in France, and whose genuineness he will do well not to question.”

“ I acknowledge myself convinced, gentlemen,” said Cortland, after a close scrutiny of the papers thrust in his hand. He tossed them upon the table. “ And now — ”

“ And now,” roared Major Grandchamps, exasperated to the last degree by the man’s insolent coolness, “ and now, I am quite aware, sir, that you would not scruple to break any promise you

might make. Therefore I exact none. But I warn you that if you ever dare whisper a syllable of the — the atrocious misunderstanding which has hung over this house for so long, I will hunt you to the ends of the earth to kill you ! As for the money you so shamelessly wrung from my cousin — ”

“ Léon ! ” breathed Madame de Laussan.

“ Keep it, and be hanged to you, sir ! But, again I warn you ! neither the name of my cousin, Madame de Laussan, nor that of my ward — ” Choked with passion, the old man finished the sentence with a threatening glare.

Cortland had remained looking at him as if he had heard nothing. He turned with a not ungraceful inclination of the head to Madame de Laussan.

“ If you will permit me, madame,” he said, “ I will take my leave. I am called to San Francisco — on business, and shall take the earliest train possible out of this city, which, by the way, madame, for certain reasons, is forever blotted — with all its people and things — out of existence for me. I fear I may not have the pleasure of seeing you again ; will you have the goodness to

convey my farewell — and my congratulations — to Mademoiselle Noé — ”

The opening phrases of this allocution rang hollow and insincere, sounding like a stilted imitation of some stage speech, but in the last words his voice broke; that best which is in every man appeared for a brief second and looked out of his eyes; he turned away leaving the name unsaid.

Major Grandchamps found himself suddenly and inexplicably moved; he followed his fallen foe to the door. “Mr. Cortland,” he said in a low voice, “I understand that you are for the moment financially embarrassed. Will you allow me to offer you a check?”

“D—n you and your money!” snarled Cortland. He walked away without a backward glance.

“Poor devil!” said Allard thoughtfully.

Madame de Laussan’s eyes were closed, her lips moved in an unspoken prayer of thanksgiving.

A hush fell upon the room. Sirène, unobserved, drew from her sleeve an unsheathed poniard and slipped it into her stocking. “The *gri-gri* has worked without it,” she muttered.



SIRÈNE

“ All the same, his bones will rot, and his marrow will burn, and he will twist in his bed in the midnight and pray to die.”

She exchanged a long look with her mistress, whose eyes, unclosed, plunged themselves into hers.

“ Poor Gabrielle ! Gabrielle la belle ! Gabrielle la malheureuse ! ” The words exhaled like a sigh from Major Grandchamps’s unconscious lips ; his old eyes were moist.

“ Noémie ! she need never know of this terrible shadow which seemed to menace her life ? ” said Allard.

“ Oh, no ! Never ! ” cried Major Grandchamps and Madame de Laussan in a breath.

“ I wish it had not been he who found the sword,” said the latter. “ However, one must not ask for the earth, I suppose, Léon.” She stood up, smoothing down her laces after her old fashion. “ You and Maxime will come to-night to dinner, also Jeanne Berthet and her mother, and Félix, the scamp ! And Monsieur Paturin, who will scold, of course, when he is told about that wasted seven thousand and odd dollars ! And Frances Heron. And Tom Masters, of course, and Don-

ald Strang. Please see that they are all asked. Sirène, you will go at once and say to Mademoiselle Noémie that Captain Allard is awaiting her in her boudoir. Now I shall go to sleep until you and Noémie come to ask my blessing, Allard, my boy. For all is well at last, *n'est-ce pas*, Léon ?”

XXVI

LE SOIR

THE note which Sirène handed to Major Grandchamps, waiting below with Allard, was sealed and addressed to Madame de Laussan.

“She is not in her room, Mam’selle Noémie,” whispered Sirène, with ashen lips; “I think she has gone away, I do not know why —”

Major Grandchamps made no scruple about tearing open the note; his hand shook as he read it aloud.

“Dear, dear grandmother,” it ran; “*he* has told me the terrible, terrible truth. How you have suffered for me — and for my mother! It will be harder yet for you *when every one knows*; for *he* has said that every one shall know at once. It will be far better for you, *ma mère*, and perhaps for me, if I go away. I am going away. But have no fear for me, dear mother; I will know how to be brave — have you not taught

me yourself how to be brave ? I love you so ! I love you so ! Only I cannot—” Here a whole line had been carefully erased, and the note ended abruptly. “ Your bébé, Noémie.”

“ He has told her, the scoundrel ! ” shouted Major Grandchamps. “ He has told her, the black-hearted villain ! I will kill him ; he shall not leave this town alive. My poor little Noémie ! Oh, I will kill him ! ”

Allard laid a calming hand on his arm ; his own face was white and stern. “ Let him wait, the hound ! ” he said ; “ we must find her first—Noémie ! God ! what may not have happened already ! ”

“ It is not that, ’Sieur Maxime, not that ! ” Sirène saw his agitated glance in the direction of the river, and divined his thought. “ She would never leave us in *that* way, my bébé. She would never give a sorrow *like that* to the Little Mistress.”

“ Then where—” began Allard.

“ To the Convent of the Ursulines. I am sure of it. It was there that Mam’selle Noémie was at school, and Mam’selle Mathilde, her mother.”

Relief was expressed in the features of both men.

“ You are right, quite right, Sirène. You will say not a word to your mistress — ”

“ ‘Tite Maîtresse has not slept for many nights. She will sleep like an angel all the afternoon,” interrupted the mulattress confidently.

“ Very well. See to it that not a breath of all this reaches any one in the house,” said Major Grandchamps; “ we will drive down to the Ursulines at once, Maxime. I will call a carriage. Meantime do you write or telephone those dinner invitations. Not a word ; it must be done. For, of course, Noémie will be here long before the hour. I will be back immediately. It is now one o’clock,” — he consulted his watch, — “ by three, at the latest, we shall be here again.”

But Noémie had not gone to the convent of the Ursulines. The return drive seemed interminable to both men.

“ You wished to speak yesterday, Maxime,” said the old major from time to time, forgetting that he had said the same thing before ; “ and I urged you to wait.”

“ Do not reproach yourself, dear friend,” Allard would reply ; “ I am equally to blame. Was it not I, even more than yourself, who planned to

surprise her with an unexpected partner for the gavotte? Besides, we are uselessly anxious. She will have gone back home long ago. The dove will return to its nest."

"She may have gone into the cathedral," Allard suggested later. The carriage was rolling swiftly up Royal Street; he called to the coachman to stop, and, descending, hurried with beating heart into the darkening church. There were several kneeling figures about the aisles and before the altars, but Noémie was not among them. His foot was on the step of the carriage again, when a small, familiar figure, hunched up on the opposite banquette, caught his eye. He crossed the street. "What are you doing here, Old Babe?" he demanded, looking down at her.

"Nuttin' 't all, Marse Max-eem," Old Babe replied stolidly; "thes a-watchin' dem angels in de winder yander. I ain' up to no mis-cheef, fo' Gawd, I ain'."

"What are you doing here?" repeated Allard sternly.

"Yas, Marse Max-eem, I ain' gwine tell no lies." She stood up, stretching her skinny arms above her head. "I'ze all crump-up. Lawd, I

been squattin' heah 'bout ten hours. Yas, Marse Max-eem, I gwine tell you." She looked about apprehensively, then tiptoed, laying a black paw on his wrist, and whispered, "*She's eroun' yan-der, in de nigger convent.*"

"Who?" asked Allard, frowning.

"Miss No-mee."

"Good God!" cried the young man, falling back in amazement. Seizing the child's shoulder, he ran her across the street, thrust her bodily into the carriage, and sprang in after her. "Now then, Old Babe," he said, quivering with impatience, but striving to speak calmly, "tell the major here, and me, what you know about Miss Noémie."

The major had hardly the time to look puzzled. Old Babe screwed up her face and peered doubtfully into one confronting face, then the other.

"You ain' gwine ter let daddy lick me, is yer? Well, den, I wuz thes quoiled-up — lak I wuz when I seed dat piz'n white man onwrop dat swode; you know, Marse Max-eem?"

"Yes, yes, Old Babe," said Allard, without the least idea of what she meant. "But Miss Noémie? Go on, go on."

“Yas-sir. I wuz thes quoiled up dis mawnin’ in de libary, hine de sofy, lak I wuz dat time I seed dat piz’n white man onwrop dat swode—”

“If you don’t tell me what you know about Miss Noémie, Old Babe, I’ll break every bone in your good-for-nothing body!” interjected Major Grandchamps.

“Yas, ole marse. I gwine ter tell you. I wuz thes quoiled up —”

It took Old Babe some time to tell her story, there being no possibility of hurrying her, though her frightened eyes rolled wildly at the major’s dire threats. Stripped of superfluities, the thread of it was clear and dramatic.

Coiled up behind the sofa in the library (for what purpose Old Babe did not vouchsafe to say), she had been an eye- and ear-witness of Cortland’s interview with Noémie Carrington. She brought the scene so vividly before the eyes of her listeners that when she came to the point where Cortland had caught the girl’s wrist, “an’ shuk her, fo’ Gawd, he shuk her!” inarticulate cries of rage filled the carriage.

“An’ dat low-down piz’n Mist’ Cotelan’ had de insu’ance to tell Miss No-mee dat *she* wuz a

nigger,” continued Old Babe. “ He skeered her ontwel seem-lak she gwine ter drap down dead. But Gawd-a’mighty, first thing you knows she riz up high ez de roof, an’ tole dat piz’n-mouf liar ter cl’ar out. An’ he thes sneak out lak a puppy wid his tail a-tween his laigs.”

Old Babe had crept up the stair after her young mistress, “ quoiling ” behind a table in the upper hall, and when Noémie reappeared, veiled, and shrouded in a long cloak, she had followed her stealthily out of the house and along the streets, until the door of the Convent of the Holy Family in Rue d’Orléans had opened to receive the fugitive. “ I thes been settin’ yander a-waitin’,” concluded Old Babe; “ caze I dunno what devilment dem fool nigger-women inside dat do’ mought do to Miss No-mee. Dey mought tek it inter dey fool heads dat she *wuz*—what Mist’ Cotelan’ call her— an’ dey mought *mek her work*. I wan’t gwine to go home ontwel I knowed how dem niggers *wuz* treatin’ Miss No-mee. You ain’ gwine ter scold Miss No-mee fer runnin’ away, is you, ole marse ? ” she queried anxiously.

“ Don’t worry, Old Babe,” groaned Allard, for the old major was incapable of speech. “ We are

going to take Miss Noémie home. That's all. You are a good girl, Old Babe," he added, as Noémie had done.

"Miss No-mee ain' no — ?"

"No, no. Hush!" cried Allard.

Major Grandchamps and the officer walked along Rue d'Orléans, leaving Old Babe to peer wistfully from the carriage-window, and stopped before the closed door of the Convent of the Holy Family.

This rambling, two-storied, red-stuccoed building, surmounted to-day by a cross, has a history all its own. During the first half of the nineteenth century it was the ballroom of the Théâtre de l'Opéra, which stood on the corner of Rue Bourbon and Rue d'Orléans. Along the tessellated marble of its entrance hall, and up and down the graceful stair, passed the elegant figures — men and women of the *haute société* — of the *ancien régime*; light feet, long since stilled, skimmed the polished floors; the gay murmur of voices, long ceased, mingled with the strains of forgotten melodies that beat the perfumed air. Later, when the old theatre was laid in ashes, and the opera had passed to its stately home in Rue Bourbon,

the place became the scene of those orgies known as the *cordon-bleu* balls, where soft-eyed quadroon and octoroon women smiled with seductive sweetness upon high-born gallants,—smiles often as dangerous as seductive, which lighted the pathway through a dewy dawn to that old dueling-ground below the city, or the shorter route to the briar-grown square behind the Cathedral St. Louis, where pistols spoke, or cold steel flashed a finale to the dancing! To-day the building shelters the colored nuns of the Holy Family, the only order of colored nuns in the United States; an imposing chapel occupies the corner where the Théâtre de l'Opéra Français once stood. White-veiled novices and black-veiled sisters, running the gamut of color from coal-black to soft, cloud-like white, glide noiselessly about the old corridors and the old ballroom; peace broods where passion once ran riot; prayers, rising like a fountain, night and day, sweep the air clean of the graceful badinage of the *ancien régime*, and send atonement aloft for the ribald jest and the voluptuous innuendo of the nights of the *cordon-bleu*.

Noémie Carrington, on her knees in the quiet

chapel, had ceased to pray ; body and soul were alike benumbed ; the strained nerves had reached that point beyond which response to emotion is no longer possible.

For hours, since stumbling blindly up the aisle to fall prone before the altar, she had wandered through a chaos strewn with the crumbling remains of all that had made up life for her, her lips mechanically framing prayers for mercy, for help, for strength ; her heart bursting with anguish, with the exaggerated fancy of youth, she lived through coming eternities of shame and mortification. She saw herself, writhing like one torn limb from limb, branded as a thief, pilloried as an impostor. She heard her name whispered, pityingly perhaps, in drawing-rooms, shrieked by newsboys about the streets, bandied from tongue to tongue through shop and market-place. Again and again she had beaten back the temptation of the river. "I will not, for my grandmother's sake ; she has suffered enough. Oh, I will not !" With equal strength she had thrust away the thought of Maxime Allard. "By now, *he knows.*" She had allowed herself but this one pathetic whisper, and turned away as

a drowning man might withhold his hand from a spar within his reach. But the storm had at last spent itself. She continued to kneel, rigid, motionless, staring, with eyes that saw nothing, at the White Virgin, who seemed to float in the dusky air above her head.

A hand fell softly upon her shoulder. "Come, my child," the Reverend Mother said, assisting her to her feet, and guiding her gently through the chapel and out upon the railed gallery in the rear. The girl's cramped limbs hardly sustained her weight; she leaned like a helpless child against the strong, supporting arm. "Poor little one!" The kindly black face smiled down into hers; she responded with a dazed uplift of heavy eyes.

From the prim garden below, lying in the mellow glow of the setting sun, arose the rich perfume of honeysuckle and sweet-olive; the Spanish Daggers lifted their unseasonable cones of white bells; an orange tree in a big tub had adventured an out-of-time blossoming which showed between the thick, clustering, green leaves. In the court the orphans and the half-orphans cared for by the Holy Family were at play. Their

plaintive voices bent in a *danse ronde* came floating up:—

*Ainsi font, font, font,
Les petites marionnettes.*

“They are — singing — down there,” Noémie said wonderingly. How indeed could any one have the heart to sing? She laid her hand on the rail; a little black spider scuttled across it and swung himself on a filmy rope down toward the garden.

“Yes. They sing, *mon enfant*, because they are happy,” said the Mother.

“I shall never sing again,” thought Noémie.

Madame Mère placed her in a chair near an open window of the shadow-filled reception room, and, dislodging from the piano stool a small, chocolate-colored half-orphan, who was dolorously pounding the yellowed keys, she retired, shoving the giggling musician before her.

Noémie closed her eyes and leaned her head upon the window sill. “Now,” she thought confusedly, “they will bring me a white veil, perhaps, and put it on my head. And I will be one of them — I am one of them! By birth, I am *one of them!*”

“Noémie!” She sprang to her feet with a

hoarse cry. At sight of Allard, standing in front of her, she shrank back, warding him away with pleading, outstretched hands. "Oh, why have you come!" she moaned.

"I have come, Noémie,"—Allard caught her ice-cold hands in his and held them fast,— "I come because I love you; I come to take you home, Noémie, *ma bien aimée*."

"Then—*he* has not told? You—you do not know,"—she wrenched her hands from his grasp,— "you have not heard that I am—"

"Noémie!" he cried sternly, "do not say it. I forbid you. It is not true."

"—colored," she gasped, sinking, half-fainting, in her chair. "Do not touch me,"—she started again to her feet, her voice rising to a shriek,— "do you not hear? *I am colored!*"

"Noémie,"—Major Grandchamps advanced from the shadow where he had been standing,— "listen, my child. It is all a mistake. A cruel, cruel mistake. Maxime will tell you."

His words fell upon such bewildered senses that Maxime had to repeat several times the story of Gabrielle Dupont's birth and adoption before the poor child could comprehend its meaning, or

its relation to herself. "So you see, my beloved," he said at last, "that —"

"I am white?" she interrupted, her large, imploring eyes fixed upon his. "I am really—white? All white?"

"White as the whitest angel in heaven," he reiterated, stroking her hand tenderly.

The tears welled from her eyes, and rolled unchecked down her pale cheeks.

"Oh, I thank God for my dear grandmother," she sobbed.

"My Noémie," breathed Allard.

"And for you, Maxime."

"Mademoiselle Carrington," said Major Grandchamps, after a silence, "there is one thing which I have forgotten to tell you, and that is, that Captain Maxime Allard of the United States Army, the son of my old comrade, Colonel Ferdinand Allard, did my family the honor to ask for the hand of my ward, Mademoiselle de Laussan Carrington, *before* he went to France, and while still under the impression that Madame Armand de Laussan was, or might prove to be, the daughter of Louis Jasmin."

"Before—?"

“ Before he knew the truth about you, Noémie, my cherished.”

“ *Maxime!* ” The pride and joy winging the cry upward made it almost heart-breaking.

Major Grandchamps turned away, wiping his dimmed eyes. Noémie had leaped to Maxime’s breast ; his arms were about her ; his wet cheek caressed hers.

“ She is simply wonderful ! ” remarked Strang, surveying Madame de Laussan from his end of the table that night. And truly no epithet short of this could fitly describe the silver-haired hostess presiding over the betrothal dinner of Noémie Carrington and Maxime Allard. The very memory of the long and anguished months, which had appeared to suck the vitality slowly, cruelly, from the slender frame, and to exhaust the strength of that indomitable spirit, was wiped out as if by magic, leaving the grande dame more grande dame than ever. She wore the de Laussan tiara in her hair ; the rare laces which adorned her trailing velvet robe sparkled with rarer, long-unseen jewels, drawn from the inexhaustible treasures of the de Laussan vault ;

even these, Colonel Fernand Allard (late of the Confederate States Army) remarked, with old-fashioned gallantry, were lustreless beside the dewy shining of her beautiful dark eyes. "She is a reincarnation of those fabled women of old, whose charm (declare the ancient chronicles) *dothe but increase with ye passinge of ye yeares,*" added Strang. "May she live forever!"

And this present chronicler desires to echo the wish. May she live forever! For never was anything, surely, so gracious-womanly as this "Old Moon wi' the Young Moon (Noémie's first-born) in her arme!"

The dinner had progressed joyously.

"As like Miss Carrington's début dinner of a year ago as one of these roses is to another," Masters observed to Jeanne Berthet, sitting beside him; "minus the Intruder" (meaning Cortland). "The fellow has gone, by the way. I saw him board the west-bound train an hour ago, scowling impressively as usual."

"Gone! The Finder of the Sword!" mocked Frances Heron. "Did he take the sword with him, a sort of consolation prize, seeing that the real guerdon has fallen, somehow, to another?"

“ Mr. Cortland has turned out to be *not* the Finder of the Sword,” Jeanne announced, with an air of importance; “ we—the family—have just been informed.”

And whisperingly, cautiously, the curious episode of the false sword went around the table; for Major Grandchamps was deeply mortified at his own failure to detect the imposition. “ He has torn that false sword down with his own hands, my grandpapa, and trampled upon it,” breathed Jeanne; “ and *ciel!* how he has cursed *l'anglais!*”

Noémie, radiant in white gown and betrothal roses, showed no more than Madame de Laussan a trace of past wretchedness. Allard, wearing the uniform of the United States Army,—at the request of l'oncle Grandchamps,—looked, Félix Monplaisir complained, unbearably, exasperatingly, abominably handsome and happy. The pair had been duly toasted and congratulated; the excitement following the announcement of the *fiançailles* had a little subsided, and Major Grandchamps was booted and spurred, and off into *le temps*, followed at close range by Colonel Allard and Monsieur Paturin. “ *Dans le temps,*” continued the major, amid a respectful silence.

“Eh? What is it, Joseph?” The butler, leaning to his ear, repeated something softly.

“Bless my soul!” — the major rose precipitately, — “I thought I smelled smoke. Do not agitate yourself, Laure, *ma chère*; it is nothing. There seems to be fire about the house somewhere,” he added in a low tone to Allard; “in the tower room, did you say, Joseph?”

He went out, followed pell-mell by the others. Even Madame Berthet panted after the lighter-footed young women, who trooped behind the men up the narrow stair known as the tower-stair. Madame de Laussan came last, leaning on Sirène’s arm.

The tower, or turret-chamber, and the hall conducting to it, were filled with smoke; the candelabra, snatched by Joseph from the dinner table, and the lamp carried by Uncle Mink, illuminated the haze and touched into glitter here and there the brass claws of a table foot, or the crystal-drops of a sconce; armoires and chairs loomed large in the shifting light, for the turret-chamber had long been dedicated to that sort of outworn and dilapidated furniture known as plunder; a discolored map or two hanging against

the boarded walls, and two or three dusty desks, seemed to suggest an ancient schoolroom ; such, in fact, in the time of Pierre de Laussan, it had been.

“ ‘T ain’t nuttin’, Marse Léon,’ declared Mink, with disgusted conviction. “ I done tole Joseph ‘t wan’t nuttin’ but a rumpus in dat secon’-han’ sto’ down yander on de side street. Som’p’n always a-burnin’ in dat sto’. *Hmp!* ”

“ He is right, major,” said Allard, from the window. He had thrown up the sash and had been peering out. “ The smoke comes from the side street ; it is already blowing away.” He drew down the window ; the sash struck the sill with a heavy thump which sent a cloud of dust upward ; at the same time a rusty nail fell noisily to the floor at his feet. One board of the wainscoting under the sill, loosened, swung slowly downward.

“ The dust of ages ! ” laughed Allard, stooping to flap his trousers with his handkerchief. Suddenly he arrested his hand and stooped lower. A moment later he had drawn from the shallow slip in the boarded wall, dust-covered, cobwebbed, time-stained, the sword hidden there by Pierre de

Laussan the day he passed out of his home forever. A bit of paper, torn evidently from a memorandum-book, was tied into the fringe of the faded crimson silk sash — the sash which l'oncle Grandchamps had neglected to reproduce in his drawing, and which Cortland, therefore, had not included in his order for a “real antique!”

Major Grandchamps detached the mildewed scrap and handed it to Pierre de Laussan’s mother.

“Vive la patrie! À revoir, ma mère chérie. Ton Pierre,” said the young soldier, from out of that wonderful Past.

“My boy! my little Pierre!” murmured Madame de Laussan, pressing the paper to her bosom.

“The Lafayette Sword!” said Major Grandchamps, unsheathing the blade, and describing a circle in the air with the flexible steel. “This time there is no room for doubt.”

“None whatever!” said Donald Strang in a steady voice, looking from Allard’s triumphant face to Noémie’s — flushed, happy, adoring — beside it.

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